

## Virtuoso: Duet

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13144026) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13144026>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">The Transformers (IDW Generation One)</a> , <a href="#">Transformers - All Media Types</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Deathsaurus/Tarn</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Tarn (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Deathsaurus (Transformers)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Role-Playing Game</a> , <a href="#">Dominance</a> , <a href="#">Submission</a> , <a href="#">Service Kink</a> , <a href="#">Alcohol</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Drug Use</a> , <a href="#">Thoughts about noncon/dubcon</a> , <a href="#">None of it actually happens</a> , <a href="#">Violent Thoughts</a> , <a href="#">Nightmares</a> , <a href="#">Flashbacks</a> , <a href="#">implied/referenced trauma</a> , <a href="#">Combat Fatigue</a> , <a href="#">Military</a> , <a href="#">Mild Blood</a> , <a href="#">Confinement</a> , <a href="#">Dehumanization</a>
Series:	Part 7 of <a href="#">On My Dark and Lonely Side</a>
Stats:	Published: 2017-12-25 Completed: 2018-08-14 Chapters: 27/27 Words: 42712

## Virtuoso: Duet

by [Enfilade](#)

### Summary

"Allies with benefits" is already more than either Tarn or Deathsaurus had ever hoped for. But Tarn has never been good at saying no to temptation. And Deathsaurus has never known when to quit. Love is a gamble, but trust is a minefield, and the risks are as high as the rewards...unless Tarn can convince Deathsaurus that it's nothing more than a game. Part one of a duology.

### Notes

Merry Christmas, it's the start of the next long fic in "Dark and Lonely Side." The chapters are relatively short, but there are a lot of them, so this one should update fairly regularly throughout 2018. The racy stuff starts around chapter 8, so, this one's a fairly even blend of character development and spicy parts.

Thank you again to everyone who's left comments and kudos, reblogged and shared, and generally supported me as I started writing a long series about a relatively obscure ship.

And special thanks to redredribbons, a partner in crime who helped me with concepts, theme and outlines for this one. :)



## Prelude in C Sharp Minor

### Chapter One: Prelude in C Sharp Minor

Tarn re-read the message he'd just input into his datapad and felt his face grew hot underneath his mask.

TO: Deathsaurus (Field Marshal)

FROM: Tarn (Acting Emperor)

RE: This Evening

My dear Deathsaurus:

You are cordially invited to a private recital in my quarters on the *Peaceful Tyranny*, one hour after the end of our duty shifts.

Best, Tarn

*I can't possibly send this*, Tarn thought.

It wasn't like him to be so....so *forward*. What would Deathsaurus think?

Tarn almost erased the message without sending it, except that before his finger could hit the delete button, he remembered *exactly* what Deathsaurus thought. Deathsaurus thought it was appropriate to send texts with messages like *want to fuck*.

Tarn absolutely *should* send this message. First, to give Deathsaurus a proper example of how to invite a lover over for the evening. Second, because if he didn't, one of two things would happen. Either Deathsaurus would keep pursuing him with public pawing and crude texts and Tarn would settle into a permanent role as the object of Deathsaurus's pursuit—not a good look for an Emperor—or, worse, Deathsaurus would assume he wasn't interested and give up entirely. Tarn felt a strange shimmy in his chassis when he realized that Deathsaurus giving up was his brain's idea of the *worse* of those two outcomes.

He really ought to be wishing that Deathsaurus would keep his place and mind his manners, but....well, there was something nice about the experience of being pursued. Primus knew he'd always had to fight to earn the smallest scrap of Megatron's attention. While Deathsaurus... Deathsaurus appeared to have some difficulty in keeping his hands off of Tarn's frame, and he didn't seem to care who knew it. It was almost as if Deathsaurus were *proud* of having lustful feelings for Tarn.

Deathsaurus was an animal, pure and simple, and yet Tarn had to admit that he was not without a sort of savage charm. Nor was he without substantial skills in the berth, and that thought got Tarn feeling flustered all over again. Truth be told, the beastformer was quickly winning him over. Tarn hit the send button quickly before he could lose his nerve.

Then he looked down at his comm link and wondered when he'd turned into a prude.

He hadn't *always* been pledged to Megatron. He'd had a life before he even heard of Megatron's writings. If he'd never developed his outlier talent, he would still *have* that life. He would be Damus of Tarn, a performer at the Vosian Opera. He might well be a *star* by now—a conductor, or maybe

even a virtuoso. And he would almost certainly have taken a *number* of lovers.

Oh, it was possible he might have selected someone to become his *exclusive* patron, but surely not right away. He would have had a lot more partners than he'd had as the Commandant of Grindcore and commander of the DJD.

His face heated under his mask as he remembered the dream he'd had about Deathsaurus and his former self.

At any rate, he had absolutely no reason to feel guilty about the invitation he'd just sent. Taking a lover was a very Vosian thing to do, and there was no reason he should punish himself for Megatron's failings. He and Deathsaurus were enjoying a fruitful alliance and they could also enjoy themselves in the berth together. Tarn refused to feel ashamed about the fact that Deathsaurus had turned out to be more than met the optic. He should be pleased that his instincts had led him to make such a... *compatible* choice in allies.

Tarn suspected that he might not get much work done during the rest of his duty shift. He was supposed to be reviewing the proposed plans to locate Megatron. The galaxy was a big place, and ships were far harder to track down than planets. The DJD and the Warworld crew had compiled a list of places the *Lost Light* had been, but it was still anyone's guess where it was headed.

And Tarn could look at those guesses another day. He'd had about enough of Megatron for a while.

For today—and tonight—he'd much rather think about Deathsaurus.

#

Deathsaurus was elbows-deep in the interior workings of the port ancillary star drive when his communicator pinged with an incoming message.

"Isn't that your *urgent* chime?" Esmeral inquired.

Deathsaurus snorted. "At least it's not the *mayday* chime." Primus knew Deathsaurus couldn't get through a day without someone doing something stupid that required his input to correct.

"Let me take that." Esmeral moved in to relieve Deathsaurus of the equipment he was holding. "I have control."

"You have control," Deathsaurus responded, knowing that it was safe for him to release his grip, take a step back, and answer his comm.

He looked down at the screen.

*Tarn .*

Deathsaurus reminded himself that this was probably a message about performance reviews for the Warworld crew or possibly another complaint about being unable to figure out how Deathsaurus's filing system worked. No point in getting *worked up*. Still, he couldn't help but feel a little hopeful as he opened the message.

His jaw dropped.

He read it over again, but no, he'd understood it correctly the first time. His wings quivered, and his tanks churned.

“Something wrong?” Esmeral asked.

“I don’t think so.” Deathsaurus held up his comm for her to read the message.

She snorted. “What do you know about Cybertronian classical music?”

“Not a damned thing.” Deathsaurus felt his anxiety overtake his excitement. It must have shown on his face.

“You could decline,” Esmeral suggested.

“The Pit I will,” Deathsaurus growled. Give up a chance to see Tarn—not just a booty call, but an actual social occasion? No, he didn’t think so. Not when he’d started to wonder if Tarn only liked him for his frame—and the things he did to Tarn’s frame. “Tarn’s not stupid. He knows I’m not formally educated, and he invited me anyway.”

Esmeral laughed. “I know that expression,” she teased. “That’s your determination face.”

“Survival required a steep learning curve,” Deathsaurus grumbled, but there was no venom in his words.

“Go on,” Esmeral said, “get out of here.”

Deathsaurus raised an eye ridge. “Tarn said not until an hour after shift ended.”

“And you’re going to need that much time to clean the engine grease out of your joints,” Esmeral said, eyeing Deathsaurus’s sludge-covered frame. “You’re not going to Tarn’s quarters like that, or he’ll throw you out on your aft.” She looked at him sternly. “Go soak in the oil baths for a while. And use wax afterwards.”

Deathsaurus admitted the wisdom in her words, but... “It feels strange, going to loll around while you’re still working.”

“Do you not think I can complete this repair by myself?”

Deathsaurus backpedaled hastily—the last thing he wanted to do was imply that she wasn’t capable—but she laughed at his apology, admitting she was teasing him.

“Go on, go,” Esmeral urged. “You’ve spent a lifetime looking after an entire crew of mechs. It’s beyond time for you to take an evening for yourself.”

Deathsaurus sighed. “I’ll have you know I haven’t had my daily serving of crew stupidity yet.”

“I’ll consider myself warned. Now *go*.”

Deathsaurus had to admit he felt grateful for the command team he’d assembled. Intelligent, capable, responsible, loyal...they were good mechanisms. It was his own anxiety, not their failings, that made him feel strange about letting Esmeral cover his role for even one day.

*Do you trust her or not?*

*...Do you want Tarn, or not?*

He would have to get over it sometime. Tonight there was much to learn. First, a thing or two about relaxing and letting go. Then a thing or two about Cybertronian classical music.

Who knew what might come after that?

# Adagio

## Chapter Notes

With love and thanks to everyone who reblogs, kudos and comments what was, originally, a rare pair and still is an unapologetic Villain Ship. We sail onwards!

### Chapter Two: Adagio

Tarn held the decanter up to the light and fussed. He'd thought it was clean, but there was still a smear on it, wasn't there? Tarn rubbed it with a cleaning cloth and checked again. There, better.

An hour hadn't really been enough time to tidy his quarters to his satisfaction. Most mechs would probably call them *immaculate*, but Tarn couldn't help worrying about smudges on his serving dishes or stray collections of dust motes that he'd missed. At least he'd gotten a new set of purple chamois sheets on his berth.

That thought sent a tremor up his spinal strut. He wasn't used to being so blunt about interfacing, but he found himself getting more excited as the hour approached. His anticipation rapidly overwhelmed his nervousness.

*Take back control. Show Deathsaurus some manners. Indulge yourself in...*

Would it be wrong to pretend that the coming encounter was part of a formal courtship rather than merely a tryst?

Tarn's spark sung at the thought. The idea of an ongoing courtship was a romantic notion he'd often daydreamed about, though usually in the context of himself and Megatron. It wasn't realistic, of course—*love* was really not in the cards for *the worst life sign of all*—but it was an appealing fantasy. Tarn saw no reason not to savour it.

*Invite your courtmate over. Show him a charming evening. Share pleasure...*

Tarn's system fizzed with an unnamed emotion. He rode an emotional high achieved without transforming, without intoxicants, without combat. He felt really good, happy even, and he wasn't about to ruin it by closely interrogating his databanks as to *why*. Time enough for that when it faded. Time enough for that when he needed to learn how to get this feeling back. In the meantime...

There was a knock on his door.

Tarn quickly looked around. Drinks and vessels set out on a sideboard covered with delicately embroidered cloths—check. Sofa, covers removed, pillows plumped, chamois blankets handy—check. Berth, fresh covers, blanket pulled back, dim lighting, softly scented shimmer pots—check. Tables, free of clutter, tastefully decorated, convenient coasters—check. The rest would just have to suffice.

Tarn opened the door and there was Deathsaurus on his doorstep. Tarn smelled fresh wax and realized that Deathsaurus must have polished himself up for the occasion. His frame was certainly shinier than usual. Tarn couldn't help but feel charmed by this encouraging sign—that Deathsaurus found him worth cleaning up for.

It was actually *more* charming knowing that Deathsaurus usually settled for *serviceable* rather than *appealing* when it came to his looks.

“You look good,” Tarn said. He wanted Deathsaurus to know he’d noticed.

“I, um, I brought you something.” Deathsaurus’s voice was uncharacteristically soft as he handed Tarn two items from behind his wings.

Tarn hadn’t been expecting Deathsaurus to bring anything. Vosian customs obligated a host to provide. The presence of a guest was gift enough.

Still, Tarn was familiar with the idea of *a gift for the host*—he had been warned, long ago, that it was expected etiquette in Iacon. The idea of Deathsaurus as an Iaconian was laughable but...but Deathsaurus had probably tried to research proper manners, perhaps somewhere like the Big Conversation, and who knows *who* had answered him, or what they might have told him.

Then Tarn looked at the gifts in his hands.

In his right hand—a big, shiny bag of Data Chipz, the nutritionally empty crunchy oil cake snacks that Tesarus ate by the bagful during his all-night gaming marathons. In his left hand—a six-pack of energon lager. The kind that came in cans and required a punch to open.

Even in Iacon, polite hosts accepted gifts graciously. Tarn straightened himself up and said, with as much dignity as possible, “Thank you. Do come in.” Deathsaurus nodded and swept past him.

Tarn looked with dismay at the tacky gifts. What was he supposed to do with these? Good manners demanded he serve the offered fuel. Well, if Deathsaurus didn’t eat the chips, Tarn could always pour them back into the bag and give it to Tesarus. And as for the energon...

“I’m afraid I don’t have a can punch to open this.”

*What a shame.*

Deathsaurus looked startled. “Oh!” He fiddled with his storage compartment and produced a multi-tool that...

Of course it had a punch. Of course it did.

Tarn didn’t look too closely at how clean the tool was, or try to determine if it was routinely used to open beverage grade fuel for the crew—or engine boosters for the Warworld. Some questions were better unanswered. Tarn quickly punched open two of the cans, returned the tool, and poured the contents of the cans into two goblets. He handed one to Deathsaurus, put a straw into his own, and swirled it, just as he would a fine vintage of Macaalex.

It looked like sludge.

Tarn inhaled the aroma, immediately regretted it, and barely managed to avert a sneeze. Before he could think better, he thrust the straw into the opening of his mask and took a sip.

Surprisingly, it didn’t taste awful. In fact, it didn’t really taste like much of anything. It was bland, watery, weak, and...*ugh*, there was the flavour, a nasty, bitter aftertaste.

Tarn glowered at Deathsaurus.

Deathsaurus was drinking deeply from his goblet, all four optics glittering with contentment and a



broad smile on his face.

So. The energon lager wasn't a mean-spirited joke, then. Deathsaurus genuinely seemed to be enjoying his.

Tarn's criticisms died on his tongue, because disgusting as the beverage might be, a gracious host didn't insult his guest's taste.

*Deathsaurus offered me something he likes, and I will appreciate that kind gesture,* Tarn thought as he tactfully hid his mostly-full goblet in the corner behind a flower arrangement, where he wouldn't have to drink any more of the swill inside. *Now I will pour myself a glass of something drinkable , wash the foul flavour from my mouth and go on with the evening.*

# Fermata

## Chapter Notes

So here's a neat little example of how fic and pro writing differ. In my original outline for this story, Chapter 3 "Rubato" was supposed to pick up right where Chapter 2 left off, chronologically speaking.

But after posting Chapter 2, I got feedback, reviews and questions from a number of people who wanted to hear more about Deathsaurus, his choices, his thoughts, his feelings. So....the original Chapter 3, "Rubato," is now Chapter 4. And here's an all-new Chapter 3, "Fermata," which addresses those questions.

Now...to do so, I had to take the storyline "back in time", so it's happening before Chapter 2, "Adagio." Or: What Deathsaurus Does While Tarn Fussily Cleans His Quarters.

I'm pretty sure I'd cut "Fermata" out of a pro story because: none of it is crucial for the ongoing plot AND it breaks up the story's chronological flow in a way that none of the other chapters do. But, I'm choosing to overlook those objections because this story is for fun, and since I thought it would be fun to answer some of the questions I got in-story, and I liked how it turned out, here it is.

Also, a little teaser for the Warworld's medical staff...

#

Deathsaurus looked at his reflection in the full-length mirror and scowled.

He hadn't been this shiny since...Possibly ever. The silver on his chest, legs, and the beak of his helm was so reflective that it resembled the mirror itself. The illumination of his biolights cast sharp lines and dots of illumination in the polish. It looked very different from the dull red glow that he was accustomed to. Light played across his frame; at certain angles, the brilliant white shine totally obscured the colour underneath.

"Are you sure about this?" Deathsaurus asked warily.

Guyhawk's head popped out from behind Deathsaurus's left wing. "What? You look better than I've ever seen you. Now kneel down so I can finish your upper back."

Deathsaurus rolled all four of his optics and complied. He'd asked Guyhawk to do this for him, so there was no point in making it difficult for the mech.

Still, Deathsaurus felt a creeping suspicion as Guyhawk set to work polishing in between his wings. Of all the mechs on his command staff, he trusted Guyhawk the least—perhaps for reasons that were not entirely fair. Guyhawk's relationship with Leozack was...

*It's not Guyhawk's fault that Leozack cheated on me.*

On the other hand, Deathsaurus *had* helped Leozack break Guyhawk out of prison on Planet Micro,

and Guyhawk *had* gone to prison for what seemed to Deathsaurus to be very legitimate reasons. He'd sold them goods, and he'd defrauded them: switching out high quality items for cheaper lookalikes, packing 99 items into boxes labelled *one hundred*, cutting corners wherever he could and pocketing the difference. Deathsaurus felt that Guyhawk should count himself lucky that the mechanisms of Planet Micro thought prison an appropriate punishment. Shortly after the jailbreak he'd made a point of giving Guyhawk a front row seat as he dealt with a supplier who'd dared to cheat *him*. Just in case the mech had any *ideas*.

Either Guyhawk had been walking the straight and narrow with Deathsaurus ever since, or he'd been too skillful for Deathsaurus to catch him. Deathsaurus thought the first option to be far more likely, given how closely he'd watched him. Nevertheless, when he felt agitated, he couldn't stop himself from contemplating the second option.

Deathsaurus reminded himself that having a mech of Guyhawk's skills had its uses from time to time. Guyhawk's contacts in the mercenary world had come in handy, as had his abilities to build rapport with alien societies. And Guyhawk was the only member of Deathsaurus's command team who possessed even the slightest bit of what Deathsaurus would call "class." Deathsaurus wouldn't dare ask any of the others to help him prepare to attend a musical recital.

But this wax job? Could this really look classy? To Deathsaurus, it looked like a bad joke.

He made a snide comment just to see how Guyhawk would react. "You know, at least three of the alien governments we trade with have sayings about putting cosmetics on livestock."

Guyhawk's head rose up over Deathsaurus's left shoulder. He frowned, as though Deathsaurus's words had displeased him. "Isn't that saying supposed to be about the futility of using superficial changes to hide a rotten truth?" His lip quirked. "And you're hardly livestock."

"I look ridiculous."

Though the mech was a slick operator, Deathsaurus sensed that Guyhawk's incredulous expression was genuine.

Deathsaurus gestured down at himself. "This wax job won't last two days, let alone two weeks."

Guyhawk smiled. "It's not supposed to, Commander. It's supposed to look very good for this evening and, if you're lucky, into tomorrow." His optics sparkled with amusement. "Though I suppose that depends on how careful you are with it."

Deathsaurus wasn't sure if that was a sexual innuendo or a jibe at his preference for the practical and sturdy over the flashy and flimsy. He decided he didn't care. It was no secret that Deathsaurus used his kit until it wore out. And if that was a sex joke, well, Tarn was the one who was squeamish about their liaison becoming public, so that was Tarn's problem.

"Where did you even get this stuff?" Deathsaurus twisted this way and that, watching light reflect off his frame and cast reflections on the walls.

"You know I supply the medical staff, right? Well, I keep a couple bottles for myself."

Deathsaurus froze. "I swear, if I smell like a mausoleum..."

"You don't smell like a mausoleum. It's not the wax that makes Cryptkeepers smell like that." Guyhawk tilted his head. "But you'll never see a mech with a finer coat of polish."

"I'd better not *look* like a Cryptkeeper, either!"

“You’re far too colourful, and can you really see yourself with filigree trim? That you don’t break within a few days?”

Deathsaurus huffed, not entirely mollified.

“If you’re seriously worried, how about some glitter on your wing feathers?” Guyhawk asked. “There’s no way you’d catch a Cryptkeeper wearing sparkle gloss.”

Deathsaurus wanted to be sure he didn’t look like a Cryptkeeper, but he wasn’t certain sparkle gloss was the best way to go about it. “It’s a musical recital, not a stage show starring yours truly.”

Guyhawk chuckled. “A little sparkle on the leading edges won’t make you look like a rev club dancer. It’s very classy.” His grin broadened. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid to try a little charm.”

“I’m not *afraid*.” Deathsaurus bit his back teeth together. Guyhawk knew him well enough to play him. Knew that being told he couldn’t or shouldn’t do a thing made him want to do it out of sheer contrariness. “It’s just...I feel dishonest.”

“Dishonest? That’s a new one. How so?”

Deathsaurus looked at his reflection in the mirror again. “I feel like I’m pretending to be someone I’m not. If Tarn wants my company, he should want it regardless of how shiny I am.”

“Ah. Now I understand.” Guyhawk shook his head. “You really are a special case.”

“And what’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Only that most mechs want to put their best foot forward on an occasion like this. You, on the other hand, have no time for anyone who won’t accept you at your worst.”

“I don’t have patience for games.” Deathsaurus resisted the urge to change form, but couldn’t stop himself from flaring his wings in a threat display. “Here I am—take me or leave me.”

“Then think of it this way.” Guyhawk ran a brush down the tip of one of Deathsaurus’s left feather blades. It was cold, and it tickled. “If you had to hit a target that was two miles away, would you use a handgun or a sniper rifle?”

“A sniper rifle. No handgun has that kind of accuracy.”

“Right. You picked the tool appropriate to the job. So...if you’ve been invited to a classy music recital, do you wear the classy wax with sparkle, or the basic, keep-grime-out-of-my-joints polish you wear down in the engine room?”

Deathsaurus knew when he’d been bested. “Victory to you.”

Guyhawk beamed, and ran the sparkling brush down the next feather.

#

“Now remember what I said,” Guyhawk said as he headed for the door. “Fifteen minutes to let the sparkle dry.”

“Yes, sir,” Deathsaurus teased. “Thank you, Guyhawk.”

Guyhawk hesitated in the doorway. His expression became serious. “Thanks for...yeah. I hope it goes okay tonight.” And with that enigmatic comment, Guyhawk left.

Deathsaurus tilted his head curiously. He didn't see that his command staff had any reason to thank him for taking a night off. Perhaps Guyhawk was simply pleased to see Deathsaurus taking some personal time. Deathsaurus hoped so. It made him feel less selfish.

So. Fifteen minutes to wait, and he knew exactly how to use them. He picked up his tablet and logged on to The Big Conversation. Before Guyhawk's arrival, he'd posted a thread.

There were some questions he was just not going to ask his command team.

What do you bring on a date?

Post By: Deszaras-336

Mech I've been flirting with has invited me to his place to watch some entertainment. My first time going over. What do I take with me?

Deathsaurus felt presumptuous for calling tonight's activity a *date*, but "extracurricular social opportunity between co-workers" might not be right either.

He skimmed the replies.

SoHighAboveYou: Don't bring anything. If it's a date, your presence is already a gift.

K-Con Commando: Spoken like a true Vosian. In most places it's considered appropriate to take along a gift for the host.

bluevsred: the decapitated heads of your enemies

redvsblue: porn

Tall\_Tankor: Can't really go wrong with a nice bottle of engex.

kingoftheroad: yeah Tall\_Tankor unless his host doesn't drink engex OR isn't big on Iacon customs

Tall\_Tankor: crap yeah. Hey Des, where's your host from?

Deathsaurus had no idea where Tarn was from, and he doubted he'd be finding out any time soon. Tarn liked to act as though the "Tarn" callsign was the entirety of his identity. If he wouldn't show his real face, Deathsaurus doubted he'd be very forthcoming with his real name, either.

But replying with "I don't know" would just make the board members curious, and Deathsaurus didn't want his thread turning into a discussion of Deszaras-336's mysterious date. He didn't know, and he wasn't likely to find out, but he had to put something.

*You just don't want to hear that you shouldn't be fooling around with someone who won't even let you see his face. Who won't tell you his real name.*

No, he didn't want to hear it. But he hadn't told Tarn his real name, either.

His lip curled with amusement at his board ID. He was sure nobody on the board knew who he was in real life. Nobody would connect Deathsaurus with Deszaras-336.

Nothing like using his real name to conceal his real identity.

Deathsaurus typed the easiest lie he could think of. For all he knew, it might even be true.

Deszaras-336: he's from Tarn

kingoftheroad: pit that's easy. engex and snacks

Tall\_Tankor: Motormaster's right. Take a beverage you like. That way you won't be mooching off his stash. Especially if the game goes into overtime. Leave him whatever you don't finish.

K-Con Commando: Nobody likes a engex syphon. OBNOXIOUS CREEPS WHO STEAL ALL YOUR DRINKS, AM I RIGHT @51Mf1r3\_+h3\_d3A+hbR1nG3r

Deathsaurus was a little dismayed at how quickly they assumed he was going to watch a sports match. Though, he supposed the average Tarnian preferred a game to a musical recital.

Deszaras-336: I have energon lager and Data Chipz

kingoftheroad: that's great. wish I could come

Tall\_Tankor: no you don't Motormaster, give Des some privacy. Come down to Maccadam's and watch with us tonight.

kingoftheroad: I'll see if I can get a parole pass, Ironhide is a rusty skidplate. Will you vouch for me

Tall\_Tankor: yeah if you buy my drinks

K-Con Commando: good luck Des

Deszaras-336: Thanks guys.

Deathsaurus sighed as he logged off. The Big Conversation was not always the most *intelligent* conversation, but—discounting the trolls and jokers—they'd given him some sound advice. Surely it was rude to leave his host with decimated supplies in exchange for his generosity. Deathsaurus would bring his own drinks, like the conscientious, independent mechanism he was.

Snacks, though....

Deathsaurus was having second thoughts about the Data Chipz. They were his favourite flavour, bought with the same meager entertainment allowance that everyone on the Warworld received. He'd passed up a book he wanted to read in order to afford them. That made him feel less inclined to share his hard-earned treat with someone else.

He could just go down to the mess hall and grab a tray of desserts to take along.

A moment later Deathsaurus chided himself for his selfishness. Tarn could get desserts from the mess hall himself. The only "gift" would be that of saving Tarn a trip. That wasn't much of a present.

Deathsaurus looked ruefully at the Data Chipz.

*Do you like him enough to share your favourite snack, or not?*

Deathsaurus hesitated. *No* was a selfish answer. *Yes* inferred levels of attachment that Deathsaurus wasn't ready to admit, even to himself.

*Afraid ?*

The very thought of being afraid of intimacy spurred his contrary nature. He grabbed the chips and the lager and left the room, heading for Tarn's quarters, hoping he could get there before his second

thoughts caught up to him.

# Rubato

## Chapter Four: Rubato

Deathsaurus supposed he owed Guyhawk, if not an apology, then at least a more sincere thank you. He still felt like a bit of an impostor in this flashy polish, but Tarn had noticed and complimented him on it. The tool appropriate to the job, indeed.

He and Tarn were sitting side by side on Tarn's couch, sipping drinks and chatting idly about not much in particular. Tarn didn't seem to be in any hurry to start the recital. Well, it was his show, and Deathsaurus had to admit that he was quite content to stay as he was. He'd let Tarn set the pace for the evening.

Deathsaurus took a Data Chip out of the bowl on the table and crunched it. He wanted another, but there'd be no point in bringing the food as a gift only to devour it all himself. He had to get his arm away from the bowl.

Unfortunately, his instincts were those of a predator. Denied the opportunity to indulge one appetite, they immediately fixated on another.

Deathsaurus stretched his arm out over the top of the couch, and then let it drop ever-so-casually onto Tarn's shoulders. He took a sip of his energon lager, totally nonchalant, but inside he was braced for Tarn to snap at him and tell him to keep his arm to himself.

Instead, Tarn leaned into Deathsaurus's touch and cuddled up until he was practically in his lap. Even as the Warworld commander set down his drink to put his other arm around Tarn, he couldn't help but wonder: *Is this a test?*

He'd come here this evening expecting some sort of musical entertainment and instead, Tarn had invited him to come sit on the sofa and then he'd put his hand on Deathsaurus's thigh.

It was just like the opening moments of their alliance. Tarn had reached right out and touched Deathsaurus's shoulder and in that moment Deathsaurus knew that Tarn would never accept any of the symbolic interface-substitute rituals to seal their alliance. No jacks in arm-mounted medical access ports. No swords dipped in chalices prior to shared drinks. No data exchanges on jump drives or laser discs. No, clearly nothing but interface in fact was going to satisfy Tarn, Mr. Letter of the Law.

So Deathsaurus had excused himself for a quick visit to the med bay where he'd acquired a little bottle of capsules that, the medics assured him, would keep his spike pressurized for the task ahead. No matter what he thought about fragging Tarn, he *would* seal this alliance. His crew's lives depended on it.

Except that Tarn had been utterly exhausted, much to Deathsaurus's surprise. Instead of being forced to stand stud, Deathsaurus had ended up helping the DJD's commander to bed and then lying beside him in the dark, wondering what the dawn might bring.

*Well* . What the dawn had brought was a situation in which Deathsaurus had not needed to use those capsules after all.

And still Tarn touched him, even after the alliance was well and truly sealed. Hands on shoulders, on arms, on hips. Deathsaurus could not help but interpret those gestures as invitations, ones he'd eagerly pursued because, well, that first encounter had been satisfying to both parties and it appeared that he and Tarn did indeed have many things to offer one another.



Everything seemed to be going well, except for one small problem—Deathsaurus's focus had gone from keeping his crew alive, to mutual business, to mutual pleasure, to...to...

Deathsaurus hated to admit it, even to himself, but he would not have taken Tarn to his private hab suite near the bridge if it hadn't been true. Somewhere along the line he'd developed a full-blown crush on the leader of the DJD. The chips on the table were proof enough of that.

It was a *far* more distressing situation than the idea of a one-off frag, particularly because he had no idea what Tarn thought of him as a person rather than as a warlord. A beastformer MTO who'd gone rogue and lived as a pirate on the Rim...Deathsaurus was about as far from Tarn as it was possible to get while still wearing a purple badge. Business alliances were one thing, and the fragging had been a pleasant surprise, but Deathsaurus had to face facts: there wasn't going to be any kind of *relationship* here. He was going to have to be pragmatic and realistic and understand that Tarn wanted his company for two reasons only: the smooth administration of the Decepticon Empire, and to blow off charge.

And he'd just about accepted that his heart's fanciful affections did not warrant serious consideration when Tarn's invitation had arrived.

Deathsaurus wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when he'd showed up at Tarn's door tonight, but it wasn't this. Not that he was disappointed. In fact, as he worked his talons up between the treads of Tarn's shoulder tracks, he really ought to be happier about the situation. Tarn sighed and relaxed in his arms, because Deathsaurus was now well enough acquainted with his lover's frame to know what areas he could touch to get reactions. And oh, *what reactions....*

Deathsaurus could very happily spend the next few hours feeling Tarn's frame heating up under his touch. Listening to Tarn's engine purr contentedly, or better yet, to Tarn's fans clicking on as Deathsaurus stoked the heat inside him. Smelling the sweet scent of valve lubricant, and hopefully, eventually, *tasting...*

Deathsaurus drew back. He knew exactly where his instincts were leading him and if he didn't want to be a beast in practice as well as form, he had to listen to his higher intelligence—while he still could. He was here for *culture*, not interfacing.

Tarn made a low grumbling noise, evidently missing the contact, and focused his optics on Deathsaurus as if demanding the Warworld commander explain himself.

So Deathsaurus did. He had no patience for an allegiance built on lies. "If you're intending to sing tonight, perhaps we ought to do it before we overheat any further."

Tarn looked at him in a way that seemed befuddled, from what Deathsaurus could see under the mask. "Sing?"

Deathsaurus fidgeted. He felt stupid, which wasn't the case—ignorance was not the same as stupidity. He thought he'd educated himself—he'd looked up *recital* to be sure he had the correct definition—but perhaps his information was in error?

"Sorry," he stammered, "was it an instrument, then?"

"What?" Tarn said impatiently. "What are you talking about?"

Deathsaurus felt his wings bristle. Was Tarn messing with him? "The invitation you sent me. You said I was invited to a private recital. That means music, doesn't it?"

"Oh," Tarn said. He laced his fingers together. "Um."

Deathsaurus cocked his head. His instincts told him that there was some other factor at play here, because if he didn't know better he would say that Tarn had suddenly become...*shy*.

"It's a euphemism," Tarn blurted.

Deathsaurus blinked, startled. "Oh? What for?"

Tarn fiddled with his fingers again. "Ah..." He appeared to collect himself, because he lifted his head and stared Deathsaurus straight in the optics. "I will have you know that in Old Vos it was *not appropriate* to send one's lover a message that read, and I quote, *want to fuck*."

Deathsaurus tried not to laugh, but he wasn't a very good liar and a chuckle escaped his mouth. "Really?" he inquired. " *Private recital* is Vosian code for *want to fuck*?"

So, no need to feel badly about the pawing, then. In fact, he now had every reason to put his talons back under Tarn's tracks and pick up where he'd left off. He'd be tasting that lubricant before he knew it. After that, the only question would be whether he felt like valve or spike tonight, because he was pretty sure he could convince Tarn to follow suit with whatever his pleasure might be.

Except...

Much as he *did* want to interface, he couldn't help but feel a little disappointed, and he realized that he hadn't had his fanciful affections as well under control as he'd thought. He ground his back teeth, hoping Tarn wouldn't notice.

*You idiot. You remember the damned mess you ended up with the last time you mixed interface with romance.*

He thought he'd learned his lesson. But when he looked at Tarn, Deathsaurus felt his spark flutter despite himself.

He thought he'd learned his lesson, but evidently *not*.

# Overture

## Chapter Notes

I am really delighted by the positive feedback on this fic. I want to let everyone know how much I appreciate reblogs, comments and messages...when I first started writing this I thought only a couple people would be interested in my battle ship, and I'm so glad to hear folks are enjoying the story.

“Really?” Deathsaurus inquired. “*Private recital* is Vosian code for *want to fuck*?”

“Yes, *really*,” Tarn said dryly, “so you can resume exactly where you left off.”

Tarn had expected Deathsaurus to be happy about that and pounce with his usual enthusiasm, but instead Deathsaurus stayed very still, watching him. Deathsaurus’s easy smile slipped into a neutral expression that Tarn couldn’t read.

The sensors on the back of Tarn’s neck prickled with warning. He wasn’t accustomed to seeing Deathsaurus without some variation of a sly smile: predatory grin, ironic smirk, optics glittering with a private joke. Deathsaurus went through life as though existence were nothing more than a game, and Tarn had never figured out whether Deathsaurus had resolved himself to being a good sport in dealing with whatever fate threw at him, or whether, in the great gamble of life, Deathsaurus was counting cards and rolling loaded dice to stack the odds in his favour. Tarn suspected it was a little bit of both. The Warworld commander was good at looking on the bright side, but he was also good at ruthlessly exploiting whatever small advantage he could find—or create.

But what was he doing now?

If Tarn didn’t know better, he’d say that Deathsaurus looked *disappointed*.

“Did you seriously think I was going to sing for you?” Tarn asked in disbelief.

Deathsaurus didn’t say anything, but his wings rose, as though he were going to hide his face behind them. They halted just before they obscured his features.

Barely daring to breathe, Tarn slid his hand under Deathsaurus’s chin. “Come now,” he murmured, “what am I to take from that expression? That you don’t want me?”

He said it casually, but no sooner were the words past his lips than he felt a sting in his spark. Because what if...what if Deathsaurus really *didn’t*?

“No,” Deathsaurus said hoarsely. “No, there’s definitely no problem in that regard.” His taloned hand came to rest on Tarn’s chestplate. “I just...I *did* take that invitation at face value. I’ll have to study more on the subject of Vosian social customs.”

Tarn’s spinal strut stiffened as an idea occurred to him. “You thought I’d invited you over for music *and you came anyway*?”

“Well, *yes*,” Deathsaurus replied, and Tarn realized too late how stupid a question it was when Deathsaurus’s very presence was already an answer.

*He came to hear me sing.*

*Not for interface.*

*Not to get anything.*

*Just to hear me sing.*

Tarn really ought to be used to the way Deathsaurus casually upended his assumptions left and right. Deathsaurus certainly did it often enough. The feeling of disorientation, though alarming, was rapidly becoming familiar.

So, too, was the sense of *urgency*. Tarn had a limited time in which to respond to Deathsaurus's admission and that window was rapidly closing. If only Tarn could think of what the correct response should be!

It was hard to think of it, though, because despite the familiarity of these sensations, something else was different. Tarn's brain did a better job of pinning that emotion down than it did of processing how to respond to Deathsaurus. He felt different because something was missing. He felt...an absence of fear.

Tarn realized that for once he didn't feel pressured to respond because he was afraid that Deathsaurus would turn on him. He wasn't worried about their alliance falling apart. They could go right back to strategizing and fragging as they had up until now and...

*...And you might never get the chance to sing for him again.*

The urgency existed because a rare opportunity had unveiled itself unexpectedly and Tarn could not, would not, let it slip through his fingers.

Deathsaurus reached out his other hand for Tarn's thigh, and Tarn felt his engine rev and knew that the moment was almost past and he'd still said nothing. In a few seconds lust would override his reason and, no matter how delightful the resulting interface, he'd miss out on what he really wanted. And yet he could not believe that he had heard Deathsaurus correctly.

"But," Tarn spluttered, "you hate my music."

Deathsaurus tilted his head. "First, I don't know that for sure, because I haven't heard very much of it. And secondly, it doesn't matter if I *do* hate it, because *you* like it and I ought to at least have a working knowledge of the things you enjoy."

"Oh?" Tarn asked, more weakly than he'd wanted. "Why?"

Deathsaurus looked at him as though he were defective and said slowly, "Because I thought this..." He paused, as though searching for a word. "...this *dynamic* between us might be based on more than doing business and fragging one another through the berth. That we might want to take some time to get to know one another. That it might be....rewarding to do so." The Warworld commander raised his optic ridges. "Am I off target?"

"No," Tarn said slowly, sensing it was the right answer, even if he didn't know what else their dynamic could possibly involve at this precise moment. It seemed to him as though the answer were one of those things he studiously avoided thinking about. He would have time to figure it out later—if he dared.

"Well then." Deathsaurus gently curled his fingers, and Tarn realized that Deathsaurus's hands

weren't wandering all over his frame. Deathsaurus was waiting. Waiting for Tarn's response. "Do you want to sing?" Deathsaurus asked hopefully. "I'm sure I could behave like a gentlemech during performance." He winked—both optics on the right side. "I make no guarantees about afterwards." His sly smile returned, playing about his lips.

Tarn could think about what exactly their *dynamic* might entail beyond business and fragging and, apparently, sharing their hobbies, at some later time. Right now he had to think of a song to sing. Quickly.

He placed his hands over Deathsaurus's, just to stave off any frame-wandering. "I, ah, I haven't rehearsed."

Deathsaurus raised an optic ridge. "Stage fright?"

"Hush," Tarn said sternly. "One doesn't speak of such things to a professional." Immediately after he'd spoken, Tarn regretted his dismissive tone. He wouldn't get anywhere if he kept making Deathsaurus feel inferior.

"I see I have a lot to learn," Deathsaurus replied, apparently not deterred in the slightest.

Tarn exhaled slowly. "A virtuoso is to be held to a command performance," he said slowly. "I would be...shamed...by anything other than my best."

What songs could he perform on a moment's notice? He had to be confident that he could hit all the notes, that he knew the words by heart, and most importantly, that he could accurately portray the character singing the song. In a pinch like this, he could think of exactly *one* song.

A shame, then, that he'd always hoped to perform it for Megatron.

Tarn had rehearsed the *Anthem of Victory* from the famous opera *The Thirteen* for over four million years, just in case Megatron ever asked to hear him sing. He had offered a total of nineteen times, over the years. Megatron had always been too busy to accept.

Megatron had never asked to hear it.

The whole song was soured, now, and Tarn hadn't sung it since he'd gotten the news of Megatron's betrayal, but...he *could* sing it, he was sure. He could sing the entirety of *The Thirteen*, not that he'd ever let anyone hear his attempt at Quintus Prime, because he just couldn't hit those low bass notes with any confidence. He could definitely sing the Anthem, the hymn of Megatronus...

*Yes, give Deathsaurus something else tainted by Megatron, why don't you.*

Tarn scowled, torn between the one opera he *knew* he had mastered and the associations he'd built up around singing the *Anthem of Victory*. Surely it would be enough to look into Deathsaurus's optics and know he wasn't singing for Megatron. There was really no confusing the two. They were both big and solid and deceptively swift, but Megatron's aura had always been one of brutal efficiency whereas Deathsaurus was pure savage predator, all feathers and claws and spines and finials, really more of an Onyx Prime than a Megatronus...

And in that moment Tarn knew precisely what song he'd sing.

# Cantabile

## Chapter Six: Cantabile

“I do have something in mind,” Tarn admitted, and Deathsaurus held his tongue, hoping Tarn would continue on his own. If Deathsaurus had to ask for explanations, it would expose his ignorance. He suddenly felt anxious about looking stupid in front of Tarn.

*You’d think you’d want him to underestimate you*, whispered the predator’s voice in the back of his brain.

Deathsaurus ignored it. Tarn wasn’t his enemy any more. He wasn’t waiting for Tarn to make a fatal error—like presuming Deathsaurus was dumber than he actually was. Tarn was his ally. He wanted Tarn to recognize him as an equal. Tarn might be better educated, but Deathsaurus was every bit as intelligent.

Deathsaurus tried to think of an intelligent sounding way to ask Tarn to explain his song of choice, but Tarn’s next words shocked him.

“It’s...well, are you familiar with the legends of the Thirteen Primes?” Tarn asked.

“Yes,” Deathsaurus said with surprise. Those stories were very old and very popular, and versions of them had even made their way to the MTO’s barracks and all the way out here, to the Rim. He’d expected Tarn to rattle off references to things he’d never heard of, but *everyone* knew about the Thirteen.

“There’s a popular opera called *The Thirteen* that tells a variation of the story,” Tarn said. “About how the death of Solus Prime cast our ancestors into war.”

“I heard that Megatron was named in honour of Megatronus,” Deathsaurus said. “Is it true?” An instant later he hated himself for asking. He’d wanted to show Tarn he wasn’t entirely ignorant, and in doing so he’d brought up Tarn’s object of obsession.

“Megatron himself wasn’t—isn’t—the kind of person to give himself lofty titles,” Tarn said. He didn’t seem to be bothered by the subject. “I will say, though, that a number of Decepticons associated Megatron with that legendary character. It posed quite a problem for the opera, in fact.”

“Oh?” Deathsaurus inquired, carefully noncommittal, waiting to see how Tarn reacted.

Tarn chuckled. “Oh, my, yes. You know that in the original story Megatronus slays Solus Prime and becomes a villain, renamed the Fallen, defeated and driven into exile?”

“Yes, that’s a version I’m familiar with.”

“During the height of the Empire, a number of ranking Decepticons wanted to ban performances of *The Thirteen*, but it didn’t work. The opera was just too popular, and the legends it was based on spread by word of mouth through the ranks. Outlawing the public performances would just cause the underground stories to spread, and further propagate the view that Megatron was destined for a defeat. I, ah, I’m rather proud to have been the one to salvage this important work of Cybertronian art.”

Deathsaurus blinked. “What’s this now?”

Tarn actually looked a little shy. “I, ah, I found a solution that involved only a few minor changes to the original material. A few revised lines to imply that the Liege Maximo character was responsible for deceiving both Solus Prime and Megatronus, and a few added verses at the end, emphasizing the danger that came from doubting the Cause. A handful of words to make *The Thirteen* a cautionary tale and teach the masses, via a popular story, that if we did not want our Megatron to fall as Megatronus did, then we all must have faith in his wisdom and trust in his guidance—that we must overlook both the machinations of outsiders and our own self-doubt, and devote ourselves entirely to the Cause. And a warning that the so-called heroes of old were all too fallible, and that we, their betters, should not view them as akin to gods.”

“Clever,” Deathsaurus said.

“Well, it would be a shame to lose such an important piece of heritage on account of a few fusspots who can’t separate reality from art.”

Deathsaurus’s instincts suggested that he would learn something new about Tarn if only he could keep the mech talking. He didn’t know what his subconscious had picked up, but he trusted his instincts. “Tell me more about the old theatre,” he encouraged.

Tarn glanced at the floor. “But you don’t want history lessons out of me.”

Right. On their first meeting, Deathsaurus had told Tarn that his history lesson about the origin of the Decepticon Cause was unnecessary. Deathsaurus was neither stupid nor ignorant of history, and he didn’t like Tarn (or anyone else, to be honest) thinking of him as either. He’d made a pointed effort to learn the centuries of Decepticon history that had taken place before he’d come online.

Except...

“I’m fully capable of reading the books for myself,” Deathsaurus murmured, reaching out to Tarn, “but so many books focus only on reciting facts, theorizing cause and effect, that sort of thing.” His talons touched the place where the mask hid Tarn’s right cheek. “It’s much harder to find a book that will tell me how it *felt* to live in pre-war Cybertron.” Deathsaurus leaned closer. “The old Vosian opera...what did it *feel* like to go?”

Tarn’s optics lit up with beautiful warm reds and sparkling white light.

“Oh, it was so popular, Deathsaurus. Everyone went. I...it was a grand experience, luxurious and opulent, but *everyone* in Vos loved it. Originally the auditorium floor was standing room only, and admission only two shanix—half that on certain days—so even the lower-paid citizens could afford to go. Then the seats would sit the middle classes and the best views in the house were reserved for the wealthy. Our most special patrons had their own dedicated boxes from which they and their guests could view the performances...”

Tarn talked on and on, and Deathsaurus watched in fascination, because Tarn was so enthusiastic, gesturing animatedly, his smile obvious in his voice. It was like the passion Tarn showed for the Decepticon Cause, but without the expectation of threats or the burden of duty. Deathsaurus had never imagined Tarn so...unencumbered. Tarn clearly loved the opera. He sounded...happy.

Deathsaurus was certain Tarn had been involved in the theatre some way, but how? As a patron? Or as a professional? What he could have done, singing with that Voice? Deathsaurus vowed to do more research. Maybe he could find out...

*Find out what? Who he was before he became Tarn? Isn’t that invasive? Shouldn’t you let him decide if he wants to tell you or not?*

Deathsaurus tried to shrug off his doubts. He'd always believed in gathering as much information as he could get. He could always choose not to use it for nefarious purposes, but he would have it if he needed it. He liked to think of it as unlocking doors. Just because he unlocked them didn't mean he had to go through them...but it was always good to have an escape route or ten. It was how he had survived this long.

*But he's not your enemy any more. Do you trust him or not?*

Deathsaurus gritted his teeth. He respected Tarn, yes, but *trust* was a bit much to ask of anyone.

"...could go on all night," Tarn said, as though he'd finally realized he was rambling, "but perhaps it would be better for me to show you?" He leaned forward, put his hand on Deathsaurus's knee.

"Because no amount of my telling will measure up to simply giving you the chance to experience it for yourself."

Deathsaurus would worry about trust issues later. He gave Tarn an encouraging smile.

"You'll have to use some imagination," Tarn said. "To pretend there's a stage..." He rose to his feet, striding across the room, turning around to address Deathsaurus. "Here."

"I think I can manage that," Deathsaurus replied.

"And you'll have to imagine an orchestra, rather than my stereo."

Deathsaurus dimmed his optics, and realized too late that he'd only dimmed his primaries on his helm. He didn't think Tarn had noticed, but he quickly dimmed his secondary optics to match. "All right," he said, and he *did* imagine a gilded stage, with an orchestra sitting in the pit beneath, just as he'd seen in the books he'd studied to learn what the word *recital* meant.

"And you'll have to imagine that I'm, ah, much smaller than I am, so that I could convincingly play the role of Micronius Prime."

*That* notion almost caused Deathsaurus to brighten his optics again, because the idea of Tarn shrunk down to the size of a minibot was laughable. What would the Functionists ever have done with a tiny tank?

But then Tarn activated his stereo and a moment later, burst into song. Deathsaurus's urge to laugh faded, swept away by Tarn's—Micronius's—words.

Micronius Prime sang the song of his dearest friend, a wild and mystical mechanism, both savage warrior and spiritual journeyer, both mech and creature: Onyx Prime, the Lord of Beasts. Deathsaurus felt a sudden surge through his spark, because for just an instant it seemed as though Tarn were singing about *him*.

*Just a story. Don't forget.*

But the next verse described how Onyx stood balanced between the natural world and the society that Cybertronians had built, and Deathsaurus's spark fluttered again.

Fiction or not, there would be no harm in letting himself pretend, at least as long as the song lasted.

So he permitted his fantasies of Micronius and Onyx to fade away, and he allowed himself to imagine that on that gilded stage, accompanied by that orchestra, Tarn was singing this song for him.



# Cadenza

## Chapter Notes

Note on this chapter: There's no noncon/dubcon in the story itself, but a character does wonder if it happened in the past.

(Story Canon Word of God: neither character is a victim of non-consensual interface; an argument could be made for dubcon in Tarn's case, but in the end, he himself believes he made a choice of his own will, regardless of power imbalances, social obligations, etc. And though Des does have some very nasty skeletons in his closet, noncon/dubcon is not one of them.)

## Chapter Seven: Cadenza

Damus of Tarn had always loved playing characters on the stage. Their lives had always been more interesting and more exciting and more satisfying than his own; their existence grander in every way. For the duration of the show, Damus could leave his mediocre existence behind and inhabit his characters, living their lives instead, taking them to their happy endings time and time again.

He'd loved playing Micronius Prime most of all.

Somehow over the long, cold years he'd forgotten—forgotten completely—that he'd actually played the character, in a minor theatre, just before he'd been accepted at the Vosian Opera House. He'd almost lost these memories to information creep. But with the first few notes of “Czar in Onyx,” Tarn found those old recollections bubbling up from a long-lost corner of his processor.

The old legends were never clear on the relationship between Micronius and Onyx. Most theatrical critics described their dynamic as the quintessential *amica endurae*. Yet there were a significant subset of academics, directors, actors and fans who preferred to view Micronius and Onyx as lovers. Where Megatronus and Solus became suspicious and mistrusting of one another and fell into tragedy, Micronus and Onyx had a union that grew ever stronger, even going to meet certain death together.

Tarn remembered the actor who'd played Onyx—what had his name been? No, that memory was gone. He'd been a shuttle of some sort, and he'd worn false feathers on his shuttle wings and a mock tail on his empennage in order to play Onyx Prime.

He'd been the one who first suggested that they play Micronius and Onyx as romantic rather than platonic life partners. And he'd portrayed Onyx so *convincingly*. When he sang on stage to Damus's character, Damus could *feel* the passion, and his response was perfectly natural.

Tarn—Damus—had fallen head-over-heels...but not for the actor who played Onyx. No, that actor had a *conjunx endura*, and also some sort of arrangement with his mate that was not quite an open marriage, but an understanding that private recitals—work-related trysts—were part of his job, and did not constitute cheating. His spark was faithful, even if he interfaced with others as an aspect of his professional life. And Damus had never found the mech that appealing offstage.

No, Damus's crush had been on the *character*. On “Onyx Prime.”

Damus had felt quite flustered to realize it. It was silly, wasn't it? Feeling attraction for someone who wasn't even *real*?

But on stage, playing Micronius, Damus could be the object of Onyx's affections, and if his own songs were sung just a little too sincerely...well, the show's director had praised Damus's portrayal of Micronius for its realism and emotional intensity.

So why not?

Damus had vowed to thoroughly enjoy the epic romance between Onyx and Micronius, and hope that someday he could find a love like that offstage, in his real life.

And now, all these millions of years later, when Tarn sang of Micronius's devotion to his savage yet honourable friend, his loyal companion, his....his *czar in onyx*...those old emotions came rushing back, warming his spark.

He looked at Deathsaurus, who was watching him intently, and he sang as he'd once sang to the actor playing Onyx Prime. He sang as though Deathsaurus *were* Onyx Prime, and he needed little imagination. Deathsaurus already looked the part.

And Tarn already felt...so much of what his rendition of Micronius had felt for his lover. An alliance that became a partnership, a partnership that became a friendship, a friendship that became a romance.

Tarn sang, and as he sang he was not sure if he was lost in an epic fictional fantasy or if he sang from his own spark to his real-world lover. Somewhere in between the notes the line between make-believe and truth blurred until it was unrecognizable. Tarn—or was he Damus? He felt as though he were singing in a dream. His spark swelled with joy, and he abandoned himself to the song.

All too soon it ended. The final notes of "Czar in Onyx" died away, leaving Tarn standing awkwardly in the corner of the room, gasping for breath.

Deathsaurus rose to his feet, applauding enthusiastically and smiling broadly. "Encore!" he cried.

It wasn't quite the same as an opera house full of cheering patrons, but Tarn liked that Deathsaurus was signalling his appreciation of Tarn's performance as though the show had been real. It was somewhat silly, given that they were alone, but it was also sort of sweet.

Tarn couldn't help but feel charmed enough to play along. He swept out his arms and bowed to the left, then the right, feeling for all the world as though he were back on that stage in the Vosian Opera House, as if the intervening four million years had been some kind of mad nightmare.

Then Tarn caught his breath as a thought occurred to him.

Deathsaurus admitted to knowing very little about opera, so how did he know about standing ovations and applause? The Warworld crew showed *their* appreciation by making loud whistling noises and pumping their fists in the air. Sometimes foot stomping was involved, too. And air horns. And throwing things. Tarn had seen these raucous displays several times since he'd joined forces with Deathsaurus. But Deathsaurus wasn't doing any of that.

He'd said he'd done *research*. At the time Tarn had been secretly amused at the expense of the poor, ignorant barbarian who hadn't known that *private recital* was a euphemism.

*You bloody idiot, he thought you'd invited him here for music so he took it upon himself to learn how to say thank you in the appropriate manner. And all you could think is how uncultured he is?*

*You...absolute...fool*, he berated himself. *If you want your Onyx Prime, there he is.*

Tarn's fuel tank churned madly as he straightened from his bow. The thing about Damus's crush on Onyx Prime...Onyx went away when the lights came up and the applause faded and Damus's object of affection reverted to an actor in a costume.

But Deathsaurus was real. And striding right up to him. And obviously interested.

And Tarn didn't have the slightest idea what to do about it.

"That was *wonderful*," Deathsaurus said as he lifted his hands to Tarn's shoulders.

Tarn stilled. Deathsaurus's touch was warm. Deathsaurus's smile was broad and *even*, equal on both sides. His usual sardonic smirk was nowhere to be found. When his hands drifted down Tarn's chest, Tarn didn't see a predatory light in Deathsaurus's optics, or feel a hungry groping in his touch. Deathsaurus touched him lightly, reverently, as though his frame were something rare and beautiful.

As though he were precious.

Tarn tried not to gasp, but he didn't think he succeeded. Deathsaurus's hands stilled on Tarn's waist.

"Am I out of line?" the rogue warlord whispered. He drew his hands away. "I shouldn't be handling you...."

Tarn caught Deathsaurus's hands by the wrists and put them back on his hips. "Perhaps not after a public performance," he admitted, "but this is a *private* recital."

"Both literally and euphemistically," Deathsaurus agreed, and set his hands to wandering once more. "This is really all right?" the warlord asked as he moved closer. Tarn could feel Deathsaurus's frame up against his own, and his engine responded enthusiastically, revving eagerly, opening his vents to cool his rapidly heating frame.

"It's more than acceptable for a private recital," Tarn murmured, dimming his optics. His memory banks insisted on dredging up that dream he'd had, the one where Deathsaurus had been a bandit king in the Carpressan desert, and Senator Shockwave, seeking an alliance or truce, had brought him to the Vosian Opera House to see Damus perform. Tarn felt heat flaring up behind his mask as he remembered where that dream had ended up—with him, or rather, with his former self, straddling Deathsaurus's lap and kissing him intensely. Tarn remembered how disappointed he'd been to wake up when their dream selves had been on the verge of initiating interface...

...and he also remembered how utterly stupid he'd been to think, even for a second, that Deathsaurus could possibly have had any interest whatsoever in a complete nothing like Damus of Tarn.

Tarn quivered.

Deathsaurus stiffened.

Tarn glanced up, wondering if Deathsaurus had somehow sensed the content of his thoughts. Deathsaurus's facial expression was one of concern, but his upper optics smouldered with angry red light.

"Is that something that was expected of you?" Deathsaurus asked, and Tarn swore he heard a sudden sharp edge in the warlord's voice. "Private recitals?"

# Staccato

## Chapter Notes

There's a lot of references in this chapter back to "Encore," so if you haven't read that one, it's got the full transcript of Tarn's dream.

They all had scars, every one of them, and so Deathsaurus really should not be surprised to find out that Tarn had his own wounds hidden underneath that fearsome visage. There wasn't a mech on Deathsaurus's crew that hadn't come through *some* trial by fire, and Deathsaurus included himself in their number.

But the idea of Tarn forced to entertain wealthy patrons in such an intimate way set Deathsaurus's energon boiling in his veins. Worse, he could feel his hunting response kicking in: fuel pump beating strong and fast, vision sharpening, scent intensifying, the world around him reduced to blurs of movement and hyperloud sounds, and his teeth aching for the taste of spilled energon. He had to breathe deeply and remind himself that whoever needed killing wasn't here in this room. If precedent held, whoever did that to young Tarn probably died before Deathsaurus even came online, leaving Deathsaurus helpless to do a damned thing about it beyond help Tarn pick up the pieces.

*Too late. You were born too late for everything.*

Deathsaurus harnessed his rising fury into a powerful need to protect. The past was immutable, but no one would ever, *ever* do that to Tarn again.

Deathsaurus wondered, briefly, if Tarn even wanted his protection and immediately decided that if Tarn didn't, he wouldn't have come here to the Warworld. It wasn't as though Deathsaurus's *modus operandi* was any kind of secret.

Tarn seemed taken aback by Deathsaurus's obvious fury. "It was normal for performers in Vos, yes..."

Deathsaurus didn't give a damn how anyone defined *normal*. His *normal* had been a small and dirty cage; then a beast under Scimitar's iron grip; and finally, cannon fodder for Megatron. He had not cared that he *should* or *ought* to be in any of those places. He would build his own normal, and woe to anyone who stood in his way.

A growl rippled from his lips, filled with menace. He was about to ask for names, but Tarn cut him off.

"It was an honour," Tarn said, and Deathsaurus could hear the hurt and puzzlement in Tarn's voice. "It was a mark of pride to be chosen."

Deathsaurus bit down hard and reminded himself that just because *he* hated the idea of such a duty didn't mean *everyone* did. Tarn's culture was an enigma that Deathsaurus did not understand. If Tarn participated in its rituals of his own free will...

...well, Deathsaurus still didn't like that idea, but then the issue would be his own jealousy and not the notion that anyone had taken advantage of *his*...

*Your what?*

*Your ally.*

Deathsaurus was entirely ready to fight the voice of reason. *My mate*, he snarled back, and shoved the imaginary voice aside.

It didn't matter that taking a lover, particularly *this* mech, might not have been his most carefully-considered decision. They were lovers now, and Deathsaurus had never done anything halfway.

"Are you sure," Deathsaurus asked, with a cutting edge in his tone, "that there isn't anyone in need of killing for daring to presume your willingness?"

Tarn chuckled. "If there were, do you honestly think I wouldn't have put them on my List long ago?"

Now it was Deathsaurus's turn to be taken aback. He supposed Tarn really didn't need to be taken care of. He wondered if he'd insulted Tarn by being overprotective...but then Tarn laughed. "Why, are you envious?" The purple Decepticon ran a taloned finger under Deathsaurus's chin. "Surely you know there's no reason to be...after all..." His voice took on a sultry purr. "You're the one who gets to be with me tonight."

Deathsaurus felt his spirits lift to an irrational and entirely delightful degree. A game, was it?

He could play along.

"Is that something that could happen?" he inquired playfully. "It sounds like a romance novel. A performer in Old Vos looks down into the standing-room auditorium floor and his optics fall on a... what would I have been, in Old Vos?"

The truth of the matter was that *what he was* would have been *not allowed through the door*. In Old Vos, the lowest waste disposal bot could pride himself on not being a beastformer. The old ways of thinking called Deathsaurus an animal, not a person, and even if pets were permitted, Deathsaurus would never have worn anyone else's chains.

He wondered if he could pretend to be what Tarn wanted him to be. Even for just one night.

"Oh," Tarn said, and the tone in his voice changed from smoky seduction to something pure, almost innocent. Deathsaurus strained to hear him. "Do you, ah, do you want to hear a story?"

"Am I allowed to touch during this performance?" Deathsaurus asked, keeping his teasing gentle.

"Absolutely," Tarn murmured, with just a tantalizing hint of smoke in his voice.

"Well then," Deathsaurus said, as he sought out the sweet spots up under Tarn's treads, "*do* continue."

"I'm afraid I just can't imagine," Tarn said, as he laid his hands on Deathsaurus's chest, "you, reconfigured, into anything other than what you are now."

Deathsaurus felt suddenly relieved from a fear he hadn't wanted to name. He supposed he'd been more worried than he'd admitted, even to himself, that Tarn secretly wished he were a jet or a tank or, well, anything other than the monstrous creature whose species name he didn't even know.

"They'd never have let me into the Vosian Opera House," Deathsaurus said hesitantly. If Tarn didn't

like his alt, it would be better if he just out and *said* so.

“What would you have done in Old Vos?” Tarn asked, stroking Deathsaurus’s head finials. “I think you would have made yourself a home in the Carpassan Desert. Built yourself a tribe of outcasts and outlaws. Made prey of anyone who crossed your path. Established yourself as the apex predator of the Carpassan Wastes.”

Deathsaurus couldn’t help but feel flattered at this description. Primus help him, but he felt as though Tarn were starting to appreciate him for what he was, even if he didn’t fit into Tarn’s usual circle of associates. He purred, pressing his cheek into Tarn’s palm.

“Senator Shockwave would end up bucking the system—as he always did—by seeking to ally with you rather than waste any more mechanisms trying to hunt you down without success.”

“Oh,” Deathsaurus said, sensing where the story was going. “Oh, I like this.” He rubbed under Tarn’s tracks to encourage him to continue.

“So you would have been up in Senator Shockwave’s box seat. An evening’s entertainment after a day of negotiation. And Shockwave would have made sure that after the performance you remained *very* entertained.”

Deathsaurus approved of that idea, but he couldn’t help but wonder... “Was that something he asked of you?”

Tarn sighed. “Still on that.”

Deathsaurus ought not be jealous of lovers Tarn had taken before they’d met—before he’d even come online—but he didn’t know how to manage these intense and irrational feelings that insisted Tarn was *his*. “I just want to know about you,” Deathsaurus stammered. It wasn’t even a lie.

“You don’t,” Tarn said quietly. “You don’t want to know.”

Deathsaurus drew in his breath to argue, but before he could speak, Tarn continued. “I never got to deliver a private recital. I mean, I...I was asked, once, and I...it was *bungled*,” Tarn spat, and Deathsaurus wondered if someone else had ruined it or if Tarn couldn’t admit to making such a mistake. “I never got the chance to do it again before....” He drew a deep, ragged breath into his intakes. “Before history overtook me,” he finished.

Deathsaurus wondered if that was code for *the outbreak of the war* or if there was something else in Tarn’s past that he didn’t want to talk about.

Still, Tarn had all but confirmed that he had, at one point, been part of the Vosian Opera, and Deathsaurus was fascinated. Tarn was always so evasive about who he’d been before becoming the leader of the Decepticon Justice Division that everyone knew and feared. Deathsaurus felt he ought to be frustrated having a lover whose name he didn’t know, whose face he’d never seen, but he grudgingly admitted there was something appealing in the mystery that lay behind the mask.

And tonight the mask was starting to slip.

The pain in Tarn’s voice was evident. Far from being coerced, giving a *private recital* was evidently something Tarn had wanted to do, and the chance had been taken from him. It wasn’t like Tarn to admit so much vulnerability, just as it wasn’t like Tarn to give any hints whatsoever about his previous life.

Deathsaurus could think of only one thing to do.

“You have your chance now,” he purred into Tarn’s audio, “if you’ll have me.”

## Intermezzo

### Chapter Nine: Intermezzo

Tarn was in a dangerous position, and not for the first time did he wonder what he was doing playing fools' games with a mech as utterly lethal as Deathsaurus. If he were wise he'd pour some acid into his Voice and put his new field marshal firmly back in his place.

Yet Tarn couldn't deny the appeal of his fantasy: the Onyx barbarian and his virtuoso, Damus of Tarn. Nor could he pretend that his frame didn't react when Deathsaurus got possessive. If it weren't for rank and propriety and the delicate situation that had united them as allies, Tarn would have given serious thought to encouraging Deathsaurus to *take* him, to *make him his*.

Though Tarn had to keep control for practical reasons, there was no reason he couldn't on occasion *pretend*. As long as Deathsaurus also understood that they were acting out a scene. If he said more than he should, he could lie tomorrow, and tell Deathsaurus that it had all been part of the game.

Tarn dimmed his optics and laid his cheek against Deathsaurus's chest. He could feel warmth even though the mask. "It feels like a fantasy come to life," he breathed.

Deathsaurus slid his hands down Tarn's arms to clasp his hands. "Will you dream with me?" he asked.

Tarn was charmed. How could he not be? The animal had manners after all.

Tarn had never thought anyone would ever seek his favour this way, anywhere other than in his dreams and the steamy stories he wrote.

Desire was as intoxicating as engex, as otherworldly as psychedelics. Tarn felt the room slowly spin around him as he surrendered to his cravings, and, Primus help him, surrender was sweet.

"I will, my Lord," Tarn whispered, and bowed his head in submission.

A moment later Tarn was afraid he'd gone too far, because Deathsaurus was perfectly still—not rigid, not stiff, but enigmatically motionless, and Tarn could not read what Deathsaurus might be thinking. Then the blue warlord lifted Tarn's hands.

"Come with me," he murmured.

Tarn was more than happy to obey. But they'd walked only a few steps—not nearly far enough to reach Tarn's berth—when Deathsaurus tugged down on Tarn's hands. Tarn illuminated his optics in time to see Deathsaurus sit in the middle of Tarn's sofa. The warlord gave him a crooked smile that seemed more shy than mocking. Tarn could tell the difference because Deathsaurus's wings were raised, as though they were about to hide his face. Deathsaurus always hid his face when he felt uncertain.

"Sit?" Deathsaurus inquired. It was a request, rather than a demand.

Tarn remembered what had happened in his dream, and he flushed, grateful for the mask to hide his awkward expression. Surely Deathsaurus couldn't mean...? "You're occupying most of the couch," he said instead.

"Lots of room on my lap," Deathsaurus invited.



He *did* mean for Tarn to sit on him. Tarn felt attracted and repelled in equal measure. His big, bulky frame wasn't meant to sit pretty astride another mech. He was the leader of the Decepticon Justice Division, for Primus's sake.

But Damus would have looked so good perched on his Lord's lap, while his Lord fondled him and took pleasure in him, and Primus help him, a significant part of Tarn wanted that, still.

Attraction won out.

"Don't you think I'm a little large," Tarn protested weakly, even as he tried to calculate how to fit his knees astride Deathsaurus's hips.

"Afraid we'll break your furniture?" Deathsaurus replied with a wink. "Would you rather go to my room and break mine?"

They *had* broken furniture together. Deathsaurus's fancy bed, to be precise, and it was Tarn's fault, for thinking Deathsaurus was mocking him, and for subsequently trying to frag some remorse into him. On the *remorse* factor he had succeeded not at all. Tarn would have felt badly about it had Deathsaurus not liked it rough.

He wondered how rough Deathsaurus would be, tonight.

"I think my furniture is sufficiently sturdy," Tarn said, "if my patron would be gentle with his singer..."

No, Tarn didn't want to play rough tonight. Damus of Tarn could never have borne Deathsaurus unleashed.

And Tarn's fantasy would evaporate in Deathsaurus's quarters, where it would be so much harder to imagine himself a Vosian performer outside the plush surroundings of his own quarters.

"I'll be careful," Deathsaurus promised as he tugged on Tarn's hands. "One doesn't capture a rare prize only to squander it. I'm not that...ungrateful," he whispered in Tarn's audio, as Tarn settled onto his lap, facing him.

This wasn't so bad, really. Tarn, sitting astride Deathsaurus's lap, was really only about a head taller. Little Damus would have been a head shorter but...this would work. Tarn didn't mind bowing for his patron.

Tarn shifted, seeking a comfortable position to settle in, and flushed a little as he realized he was pressing against Deathsaurus's panels. Deathsaurus dimmed all four of his optics and sighed. He released Tarn's hands in order to use his talons to explore Tarn's back.

"Now," Deathsaurus purred, "let's see about that encore."

Tarn blinked. "You want me to sing again? Like *this*?" Scandalous. Still, at this moment, Tarn would be more than happy to sing on command.

"Isn't that what *encore* means?" Deathsaurus asked. "I'm *sure* I got that one right. If I liked the performance, I ask for one more song?"

"That's right," Tarn admitted. "What...what do you want me to sing?"

"Mmmm." Deathsaurus's smile broadened. Tarn gasped as Deathsaurus's talons found a very sensitive spot on his back...a spot that sent a zing of heat straight to his valve. Deathsaurus leaned

forward and whispered, “I want to hear the song you make when you overload in my arms.”

Tarn felt his faceplates grow red-hot under his mask. “M-my lord,” he stammered, “I don’t know if you’ve grasped the concept...*I’m* supposed to be pleasuring *you*...”

“Do you think I don’t take pleasure in watching you come for me?” Deathsaurus replied, not deterred in the slightest. Oh, he had a wicked, wicked grin, and he fixed Tarn with a gaze that made Tarn think that Deathsaurus was pure predator, and he, Tarn, the prey.

Except no prey ever longed for a predator’s attentions the way Tarn wanted Deathsaurus now.

“Do you think,” Deathsaurus persisted, “that it doesn’t feel good when you...ah, like that.” Tarn realized with a flush of shame that he was instinctively grinding their panels together.

Deathsaurus drank in a long intake of air. “And I, for one, have every confidence that taking my pleasure of you will be even better after you’ve had...hm...three overloads? Maybe four?”

Deathsaurus leaned in closer, and his hot breath tickled Tarn’s audials when he asked, “How hard will your spike be then?”

Tarn mewled, shivering in anticipation.

“There,” Deathsaurus growled. “That’s what I want to hear.” His hands moved on Deathsaurus’s back, stroking and teasing.

Tarn moaned, a little louder.

Deathsaurus’s engine thrummed.

Tarn realized that if he could only abandon his inhibitions and give voice to his pleasure, he couldn’t help but give Deathsaurus exactly the encore he was seeking.

# Minuet

## Chapter Notes

Warning in this (and some subsequent) chapters for violent thoughts/graphic violent imagery that is not acted upon.

And yes, I think there's a chapter count! I'm guessing 30, maybe a few more.

#

I've not had a chance to respond to all the comments I've received on previous chapters, but each and every one is read and appreciated. With particular thanks to the folks who give me feedback on each chapter. Writing this fic is a true joy. Thank you.

## Chapter Ten: Minuet

Deathsaurus dimmed his optics and listened to Tarn's chorus of mews, gasps, and moans. Now *this* was the sort of music he could appreciate.

He *might* be pushing his luck a little far. Tarn sitting on his lap like a pretty plaything really was a bit audacious, even for him. On the other hand, Tarn himself had described the scenario as *like a fantasy*. If they both had fun with this arrangement, who was Deathsaurus to say no?

Besides, it was nice to see Tarn taking a little initiative for a change. Up until now it had always been Deathsaurus pursuing Tarn. While, like any predator, Deathsaurus enjoyed a good chase, recently Deathsaurus had started to wonder if Tarn were interested in *him specifically* or if he'd respond the same way to *anyone* with the nerve to pursue him. Deathsaurus had always been left guessing as to what Tarn actually wanted to have happen once Deathsaurus finally caught him.

Tonight, for the first time, Tarn was being clear about what he wanted. Deathsaurus was more than a little surprised at Tarn's game of choice, but he'd be melted down for scrap before he expressed his surprise out loud. There was no way he was going to scare Tarn off. Deathsaurus could *work with* "Tarn the virtuoso," pretty singer of Old Vos.

If the thought of *Tarn* of all people bowing so submissively made Deathsaurus smile, well, he'd just bury his face in Tarn's neck and nip at Tarn's throat and lave the tender spot with his tongue, and hide his expression that way, so as not to betray his amusement. One thing for certain—Deathsaurus would much rather have Tarn dazed with pleasure under him, than thinking Tarn might take his pleasure by putting a chain around Deathsaurus's neck.

To that end, Deathsaurus reached out with his index finger to rub firmly on the upper edge of Tarn's blazing-hot valve panel. Tarn rocked against him once, twice—and then the panel sprung open, revealing Tarn's sensitive anterior node to Deathsaurus's questing finger.

It was all Deathsaurus could do to hold still. Tarn took up the slack, pressing his node into the finger and shifting his hips back and forth once, twice...

Tarn threw back his head and emitted an inarticulate cry.

He overloaded that easily? Deathsaurus had underestimated just how excited Tarn must be. How long had Tarn had entertained this fantasy? Now, to finally indulge it...how revved up he must be. How reckless. How hot...

Primus, but Tarn's neck looked good like that, bared to Deathsaurus's fangs.

Deathsaurus could've taken hold of his prey's neck in a death grip, punching his teeth right down to the spine. He ran his tongue lightly over Tarn's throat instead. Tarn moaned....pure music.

Deathsaurus lightened his touch on Tarn's node and tickled his claw back and forth, so delicately that he wondered if Tarn could even feel it.

Tarn certainly wanted to feel it. He leaned in closer, shifting his hips, but Deathsaurus gentled his touch even more, keeping his claw a whisper over Tarn's pleasure-swollen anterior node. He wasn't sure what to do with the golden ring that pierced Tarn's node, so he avoided the question by tracing his way around it instead.

"My *Lord*," Tarn groaned, and Deathsaurus shivered with barely contained desire.

Deathsaurus withdrew the claw and thrust it between his own lips, tasting just the faintest flavour of Tarn's pleasure.

Tarn whimpered at the loss of something firm to grind against, but Deathsaurus didn't intend to torment him. He wouldn't keep him waiting long. He laved his fingertip with a generous amount of moisture and, opening his mouth, he lifted the dripping claw and placed it back against Tarn's anterior node.

Tarn's optics widened. Deathsaurus could hear the gasp behind the mask before Tarn's optics dimmed and an inarticulate moan escaped the slit in the mask.

"You like it wet, don't you," Deathsaurus observed. The comment was hardly necessary; the sounds Tarn was making were proof enough. Yet Deathsaurus was certain that Tarn moaned louder because Deathsaurus had described his preferences out loud.

Deathsaurus carefully nudged the golden ring, just to give Tarn a little more sensation. Tarn crooned with desire, a sound that ended in a stifled murmur, as though Tarn were biting down on his own lip under the mask.

Deathsaurus upped the ante again. "What's back here?" he asked, letting his claw slip from Tarn's node and probe between the lips of his valve.

Tarn's moan of raw need was exquisite.

"My, you need something more to rub against, don't you?" Deathsaurus inquired.

Tarn nodded vigorously. Deathsaurus considered making him beg, until he realized that Tarn might no longer be able to speak at all. It would be much more polite to make a deal.

"Overload for me again," Deathsaurus whispered, "and I'll open my spike panel."

Tarn's optics widened under the mask. Deathsaurus thought the offer was straightforward enough. If Tarn really wasn't interested in Deathsaurus's spike, he had only to decline.

"Overload...without your assistance?" Tarn panted, running his right hand down his side. When Tarn's fingers came to a stop on his node, Deathsaurus understood what Tarn had in mind.

Oh. *Oh*. Deathsaurus would happily have rubbed Tarn's node to help with the requested overload, but if Tarn had taken Deathsaurus's condition as a demand for a show...well, Deathsaurus would just pretend that's what he'd intended all along. Deathsaurus had not gotten this far in life by not knowing how to take advantage of unexpected opportunities.

He withdrew his claw and rested his hands on Tarn's hips instead. His fuel pump hammered with anticipation, and he leaned back for a better view, pressing his wings into the back of the couch.

Why not let his pretty virtuoso entertain him?

Tarn's fingers moved ever so slowly on his own node. His index finger slid through the golden ring and he tugged once...twice...then rotated just a few degrees...

Deathsaurus stared, fascinated. In the back of his mind, his survival instinct kicked in and sent a message that cut straight through the haze of pleasure, registering in his consciousness: *Watch this and remember. He's showing you how to please him with that ring.*

Deathsaurus watched Tarn tug on the ring, moving it a few degrees to the right, tug, back to the left, tug...

He'd never wonder what to do with the ring again.

By Fortune, but Tarn was a natural performer. It was surely no coincidence that no matter how Tarn played with his node, he almost never blocked Deathsaurus's view. Tarn arched his back and swayed his hips and gazed right at Deathsaurus, optics glittering. Instead of becoming shy when he met Deathsaurus's gaze, the knowledge that he was being watched seemed to give him the nerve to reach down and slide his claws through the rings on his valve lips and slowly pull them apart, baring his entire valve for Deathsaurus.

Deathsaurus licked his chops and wondered if he was drooling. He reached out for Tarn and caught himself just in time. He mustn't look like a slaving animal, not even if he *felt* like one, watching a show like this and knowing he wasn't supposed to touch.

But Tarn didn't seem angry that Deathsaurus had been tempted to break the rules. "If you like the show," he whispered, "you're supposed to applaud."

Deathsaurus was more than happy to comply. He clapped his hands, if only to stop them from wandering again.

Tarn dimmed his optics and clearly revelled in the accolades, releasing the rings on his valve lips, returning to his node. He rubbed harder, faster, moving his hips and making needy whimpers that Deathsaurus could hear even above the sound of his applause. Deathsaurus realized that Tarn thirsted for recognition: it fuelled him and thrilled him.

Privately, Deathsaurus hoped Tarn got off quickly. He wasn't sure how much more of this foreplay he could take. This unselfconscious, hedonistic, uninhibited, submissive, indulgent Tarn was... was...

...was clearly hungry for a good fragging that Deathsaurus was more than happy to provide.

# Rococo

## Chapter Eleven: Rococo

*You shouldn't be doing this.*

Tarn was well aware that nuke was in limited supply, and when that cavern on Messatine was tapped out, there would be no more. If he was smart, Tarn would save the nuke hits for big and dangerous missions—Overlord, for example—and make do with circuit boosters and nitro and distilled nucleon and those little performance-enhancing cocktails.

But the Decepticon army had outlawed circuit boosters, for good reason. Nitro didn't do anything for Tarn any more—he'd used too much, too often. Distilled nucleon was just disappointing after feeling the kick of nuke.

Legal performance enhancers didn't make Tarn into anything *special*. It was bad enough feeling ordinary when he was pursuing genericons. He couldn't do his work justice, as it were, if he couldn't make both himself and his quarry believe that he was eminently qualified to be their judge, jury and executioner. It was so hard to feel eminently qualified when one felt more like an imposter.

A phony in a mask.

Hopped up on nuke Tarn finally *felt* qualified and powerful and ultra-competent, like someone who could do anything Lord Megatron asked of him without qualms. Nuke made him feel as though he were no longer an actor playing a role, but rather, that he'd actually transcended his limits and truly *become* "Tarn." He'd taken a character that Megatron had created, embodied it, and brought it to literal life, and there would be no end to this performance. Damus of Tarn was gone, and now he was Tarn, forevermore.

But when he came down from the high he was Damus of Tarn again. Hiding behind a mask. Desperate not to bungle the role of a lifetime.

So he'd taken to sneaking nuke in his quarters—a swallow there, an injection there. Nothing as powerful as a session in the tank, but enough to help him feel comfortable in his own frame. And every time he'd known it was wrong.

Sometimes he'd count down hours, or even minutes, to delay the hit just a little. Sometimes he even put the nuke back down, knowing he was making a wise decision by not using, only to turn around and pick it up and take it fast before he could stop himself. He knew he shouldn't be doing it even as he did it, until the high came and washed his regrets away.

That was exactly how he felt now, kneeling astride Deathsaurus's lap, teasing his own anterior node and showing off his frame for his patron's pleasure.

*He's not your patron. He's your field marshal—your subordinate—and he's infamously headstrong and you're just encouraging him by letting him pretend for even an instant that he has power over you.*

Yet Tarn wanted nothing more than to serve and be praised, even if only for an evening.

*What's the point in being Emperor if I can't have the one thing I want most?*

As Tarn tugged on the piercing in his anterior node, and felt pleasure spike ever higher through his

frame, he knew he was already too far gone to stop. He was going to overload on Deathsaurus's lap, and Deathsaurus was going to keep his word and release his spike and...

Tarn didn't know how Deathsaurus planned to frag him and didn't care, as long as he could please his czar in onyx.

*The Onyx Prime to my Micronius.*

*The patron to my virtuoso.*

*The field marshal to my Emp....no.*

*No.*

*I want to serve him. I want to call him Master.*

Tarn whimpered, louder, feeling overload so close and yet impossibly far away. He'd wanted to indulge this fantasy for millions of years and now, here he was, but *he* was supposed to be the Lord now, *he* was supposed to make Deathsaurus bow to him and yet all he wanted was to kneel and be praised, and the conflict within him warding off his overload, put his pleasure so far out of reach even though he could feel it so near...

Tarn groaned, and the sound was more pain than pleasure.

Deathsaurus heard it instantly.

"Can I help you?" the warlord asked, and wasn't that *just* like Deathsaurus, with his perverse notions of communal respect and absolutely shameless compassion. Tarn wondered how Deathsaurus dared flaunt his weakness for everyone to see until he remembered that Deathsaurus's so-called *weakness* had given him a crew five hundred strong, each and every mech loyal to the death.

It frightened Tarn to think that Deathsaurus didn't need to rule by fear. "Tarn" and his DJD were all about fear. What use would Deathsaurus have for *Tarn* if he had no interest in the one thing Tarn was good at?

Tarn supposed he'd have to keep Deathsaurus very, very happy in the berth to earn his keep, and... Tarn was suddenly content with that notion.

"Do what you will," he breathed in response.

Deathsaurus needed no more encouragement than that to reach up and pop his finger in his mouth. Tarn had no idea what Deathsaurus was playing at, sucking on his own finger while Tarn played with his own node. Was it supposed to make Tarn think about sucking spike?

That was one thing Tarn couldn't do. Tarn felt his fuel tank chill. He could no more take off his mask than he could suck a spike through it.

*He was going to disappoint his patron.*

Then Deathsaurus drew out his lubricant-laced finger and moved it with stunning swiftness. Tarn didn't know what Deathsaurus was doing until his overheated systems registered a shocking and impossibly erotic sensation: his hard-worked anterior node, drenched in thick moisture.

Tarn cried out loud. He couldn't not. He wasn't prepared for Deathsaurus to help him and he certainly wasn't prepared for it to feel this good...

Tarn had no defenses against a merciful master.

“Deathsaurus,” Tarn whimpered as his patron stroked his node with that delicious wet finger. Tarn tugged the ring in his node until he found a rhythm that fit with Deathsaurus’s strokes to...

Oh, Primus, Tarn had never felt this good solely from touching his node before.

“Please don’t stop,” Tarn whispered, and immediately regretted it, because of course he’d just told Deathsaurus how to hurt him, how to punish him. Well, perhaps he deserved to be punished.

But Deathsaurus seemed to have no interest in punishment. “I won’t,” Deathsaurus promised. “I want to see you overload. I want to see you enjoy yourself. *Show me your pleasure...*”

Deathsaurus might not have meant his last words as a command, but Tarn was eager to interpret them that way. The idea of being *ordered* to overload for his patron’s amusement was so erotic that it smashed right through the barrier keeping Tarn from the pinnacle of ecstasy. He overloaded there and then, helplessly convulsing in the grip of pleasure.

The whole while, Deathsaurus rubbed his node with long, wet strokes. He even dipped his finger into Tarn’s valve to blend Tarn’s own lubricants with Deathsaurus’s and slide them back over his glistening anterior node.

As Tarn’s climax finally faded, his node became very sensitive, and he shied away from even the slightest pressure on the oversensitive area. Deathsaurus noticed, because he rested his right hand on Tarn’s inner thigh instead—a very intimate touch, yet one that wouldn’t overstimulate.

Deathsaurus’s left hand clicked open his spike panel.

Tarn, who’d only just started to catch his breath, gasped as Deathsaurus’s spike slid through the wet folds of his valve.

“Do you still want this?” Deathsaurus asked mildly, but then he leaned forward and whispered, with a flash of fangs, “My pretty virtuoso?”

If Tarn had started to feel ashamed of his egregious display and inappropriate fantasy, well, those words drove all regrets from his mind. His valve clenched on nothing and dripped enthusiastically. Yes, he wanted this.

“My czar in onyx,” Tarn whispered. “Anything for you.”



# Waltz

## Chapter Notes

I'm so pleased to see people curious about Deathsaurus's point of view. Just over half of the story is from his point of view :)

### Chapter Twelve: Waltz

Deathsaurus could not possibly have heard Tarn properly. He had to have misunderstood. His hearing might be affected by the roaring of his fans and the thundering of his own fuel pump.

But in his spark, he knew he'd understood correctly. Tarn was offering himself to Deathsaurus, unconditionally. If Deathsaurus thought that Tarn had made him run hot before, it was nothing next to the way he was getting his crankshaft cranked right now.

Deathsaurus wondered when he'd gotten so interested in using his spike. The answer, of course, was obvious: from his first night in Tarn's berth.

From the moment he'd arrived on the Warworld, Tarn had shattered Deathsaurus's preconceptions. He'd also shaken the foundation of Deathsaurus's self-image. Deathsaurus was already eagerly doing things he never could have imagined himself doing only a few short weeks ago. The fancy paint job. Sharing his chips. Willing—*wanting*—to stand stud.

He ought to consider those warning signs. He ought to put up his guard before Tarn's siren call led him to a place where he would betray himself.

But Deathsaurus also liked to learn new things, and right now he wanted to learn where this partnership with Tarn would take him.

So much sensation and he'd only had his panel open for a matter of seconds. Already he felt the pleasure threatening to swallow his higher thoughts, much in the way Tarn's wet and eager valve was doing its best to swallow up his spike. Deathsaurus's spike stroked through the folds of Tarn's valve, perpendicular to the entrance, smearing lubricants everywhere. Tarn leaned forward, enthusiastically grinding his node against the base of Deathsaurus's spike.

Deathsaurus had only a few seconds of conscious thought left to him, and he used most of them for Tarn's benefit. "Those rings," Deathsaurus panted, remembering that Tarn had four piercings in each valve fold. "I don't want to pull on them."

"Here," Tarn said eagerly, and he reached down and hooked the rings with his own fingers and pulled them out of the way—pulled his own valve open wide. Deathsaurus groaned. There was really nothing quite like a mech who was beyond self-consciousness, beyond shame.

Especially when that mech was Tarn. Tarn was ordinarily so concerned with what other people thought. Yet he hadn't given even a moment's consideration to those hypothetical judges when he opened his valve for Deathsaurus. To what people might think if they knew that the leader of the Decepticon Justice Division couldn't wait to get fragged by a renegade beastformer. A MTO.

Deathsaurus wondered if he'd shaken Tarn's self-image, too.

Deathsaurus accepted the invitation, tucking his spike in between the folds of Tarn's valve. He wrapped his arms under Tarn's shoulders and pulled him close. "Is this comfortable?" It felt incredible to Deathsaurus, but he had to be sure it was good for his partner, too.

"Yes, my Lord," Tarn said, his gaze lowered.

Deathsaurus felt his hide prickle. There was a certain *problem* with overly submissive mechs. Deathsaurus slid his right beast paw under Tarn's chin and lifted his mate's head until Tarn's gaze met his own. "You'll tell me if it isn't?" Deathsaurus said sternly, and it wasn't a request. These submissive mechs—they'd suffer in silence rather than interfere with another's pleasure. Some of them even craved suffering. Deathsaurus could not bring himself to accept such a thing. His people were for protecting. He reserved his cruelty for his enemies.

"Y-yes, my Lord," Tarn said, with a tremor in his voice.

"Good." Deathsaurus released Tarn's chin in favour of furling both his beast paws around Tarn's gun barrels.

Tarn sighed and relaxed fully against Deathsaurus's chest. Deathsaurus held him close, feeling Tarn's hips pumping, moving his valve up and down Deathsaurus's spike. By the Fates, it felt good. Deathsaurus's spike ached, but only a little. He could take a lot more teasing, and better if they took their time...he wanted to watch his beautifully responsive virtuoso overload again.

Deathsaurus amused himself by dipping his beast claws in and out of Tarn's gun barrels and listening to Tarn gasp and moan. The barrels appeared to be incredibly sensitive. Idly, Deathsaurus wondered if Tarn felt pleasure when he fired them. There certainly seemed to be a correlation with Tarn's valve—the more he toyed with them, the wetter Tarn's valve became. Deathsaurus could hear slippery noises coming from between their bodies.

Tarn heard them too, and he grew still in Deathsaurus's arms. Deathsaurus growled—his pleasure faded when Tarn stopped moving. He remembered that he wanted Tarn to be comfortable. "Problem?" Deathsaurus asked, trying to keep his voice from snarling.

"It's obscene," Tarn confessed in a shamed whisper. "The sounds."

"Then sing for me," Deathsaurus purred, "and drown them out."

Tarn moved his hips, and the pleasure returned, and Deathsaurus sighed in appreciation. Tarn mewed too, and then the next few moments were a duet of cries and moans as the two warlords surrendered to the pleasures of one another's frames.

"That's good," Deathsaurus breathed, and Tarn's cries grew noticeably louder.

Curiosity piqued, Deathsaurus dared to take a gamble. If this didn't work, he was sure he could stroke Tarn under his shoulder-treads and put him back in the mood soon enough. "You're doing so well," he whispered.

*Primus*, but Deathsaurus *swore* he felt the temperature in Tarn's valve rise. Not to mention the loud moaning, and the way Tarn grasped at the horns on Deathsaurus's chest and held on tight.

Deathsaurus was not one to lose an opportunity. "My beautiful virtuoso."

Tarn moved on his lap and Deathsaurus gasped as the head of his spike almost caught the opening of Tarn's valve before sliding by.

If a few pretty words could make Tarn do *this*, Deathsaurus was *more* than happy to indulge him.

“You look so good like this,” Deathsaurus murmured.

Tarn leaned forward, taking some of his weight onto his knees. His hips pumped again, and this time, when the head of Deathsaurus’s spike caught the rim of his valve, it didn’t glide by. It nudged its way in, instead.

Deathsaurus bit his lip. Tarn looked lost in pleasure, and it was a beautiful look for him, but did he know what was happening?

“Tarn,” Deathsaurus said.

Tarn mewled, dazed.

“*Tarn*,” Deathsaurus repeated, more urgently.

Tarn blinked, coming back to himself. “What?” he demanded, almost petulantly.

Deathsaurus winced as his frame loudly protested the way he was holding it back. “We’re on...the verge of interface,” he panted.

Tarn mewled again. Deathsaurus couldn’t interpret what that sound meant. He had to ask Tarn to clarify. “Do you want...”

“*Take me*,” Tarn begged.

Deathsaurus wasn’t in any position to argue. He held his mate close, rocking into him. He dimmed his optics and felt his spike slowly sinking into the wet and welcoming valve. “Thank you,” Deathsaurus murmured, not knowing what else to say in the face of such generosity. Such *trust*.

Tarn gasped, and suddenly Deathsaurus knew exactly what he wanted to communicate. He leaned forward and brushed his lips—

--over cold metal.

He’d never truly *despised* Tarn’s mask before that moment.

Deathsaurus growled, wondering why Tarn didn’t just take it off. What was he trying to hide? It *stung*, to think Tarn had to protect himself from Deathsaurus’s gaze.

*Do you want his trust?*

*Or do you want his secrets—as ammunition in your cannons?*

Deathsaurus didn’t want to question his own motives. Particularly not now.

Deathsaurus used his upper optics to sneak a peek at the scarring around Tarn’s left eye, just visible through the optic holes in the mask. Deathsaurus reminded himself that Tarn placed far more value on his appearance than Deathsaurus did. The mask might be a concession to vanity. Why Tarn hadn’t had that scarring repaired was a question for another time, preferably one where they weren’t on the brink of interface.

More important *now* was how Deathsaurus could convey his intentions with the mask in place. His optics dropped to that narrow slit over Tarn’s mouth and an idea occurred to him.

“Stick out your tongue,” Deathsaurus said. He realized too late it sounded like an order. He often struggled to rein himself in—many mechs thought him arrogant, intimidating, disrespectful, even a bully, and all because he spoke his mind and expected others to step up and speak theirs. It had not done him any favours in interactions with superior officers on Cybertron. He should have learned at least to feign deference—maybe then he wouldn’t have been assigned the suicide mission that had led him to break ranks with Megatron. He’d obviously learned nothing, because here he was again, making demands of his ally and Emperor as though he and not Tarn were in charge.

Except that Tarn complied, immediately and unquestioningly, and with a tight squeeze of his valve that made Deathsaurus see stars.

*Right. The game. A patron commands his singer...*

Deathsaurus licked his lips, suddenly excited. “Bow your head.”

Tarn obeyed, though Deathsaurus could read the confusion in his optics.

Deathsaurus lifted his chin and touched his tongue to Tarn’s, the closest he could manage to a kiss.

# Rubato

## Chapter Notes

Author's Note: If Deathsaurus had known that he'd be engaging in D/s play, he'd have done his research and learned a few basics, like setting a safe word, and taking the time to talk over what they both wanted from the scene before starting to play. Unfortunately, they aren't all that great at communicating, though they're working on it.

Deathsaurus has had to "learn while doing/nobody will wait for you, so you'd better figure it out as you go along" often enough in his life that he thinks it's totally normal to do it in bed, too. Hence why he doesn't suggest they take some time to maybe think about this and learn together before starting on the main event. Tarn's been raised in a culture where he thinks it's normal to submit to what's demanded of him by his superiors, whether he wants to do it or not, and the comfort of familiarity outweighs the discomfort of whatever might be asked of him.

So they're not exactly role models to imitate at home. That being said, Deathsaurus is very concerned with consent and his partner's pleasure and comfort, and those are definitely desirable qualities in a RL partner.

## Chapter Thirteen: Rubato

*What kind of interface was this?*

Tarn definitely had Deathsaurus's spike in his valve. Shallowly—he could only feel it when he tightened his bottom two sets of calipers—but it was definitely there, and they were definitely interfacing.

Maybe Deathsaurus didn't understand the game properly. Maybe he didn't realize that the theatre patrons of Old Vos came to the Opera House to be entertained: first by the performance, later by the performers, and often in a far more intimate sense. Private recitals regularly became the occasions whereby patrons indulged secret kinks they wished to conceal from their high-society lovers and partners. Putting on a show for Deathsaurus...that was a common request, and typically the prelude to more exotic demands.

*You can have what you will of me. Is this all you want?*

But then Deathsaurus seemed to get comfortable in his role, albeit with a bizarre request. Tarn had no idea why Deathsaurus wanted to see his tongue. To see if he could manage to lick valve with his mask on, perhaps? Sadly, it would be an awkward affair—the opening in the mask was narrow, though Tarn could get the tip of his tongue through. He wondered if that would be enough.

He wondered if Deathsaurus would realize that he had no experience whatsoever in that sort of thing. He would probably be terrible at it. With a sinking feeling, he realized that Deathsaurus wasn't the kind of mech to get any satisfaction out of berating Tarn for failure. No, Deathsaurus would simply *leave*...

Deathsaurus was already infamous for his ability to turn his back and walk away.

Fear clutched Tarn's spark, squeezing and wrenching at the thought of letting Deathsaurus down, of Deathsaurus walking away, of Deathsaurus *abandoning him*.... If Deathsaurus would only stay to shame him, at least he would still be by Tarn's side. Anything would be better than losing Deathsaurus through his own inadequacy. No punishment could possibly hurt more than that.

Deathsaurus slid his own tongue out from between his lips and touched it to Tarn's.

Tarn blinked and drew back his head, startled beyond comprehension. His tongue retreated, filling his mouth with a wild and sweet flavour. *Deathsaurus*.

Deathsaurus gave him a sad smile. "No?"

Tarn let go of Deathsaurus's chest and raised his hand to the slit in his mask. "I...you..."

"It's fine," Deathsaurus said softly. "We don't have to..."

Tarn was shocked enough to break character. "You could fuck me and all you want to do is kiss?"

Deathsaurus arched an optic ridge. "You may notice that I actually *am* fucking you. Right now."

"But don't you want..."

"You know what I want." Deathsaurus ran his hands up Tarn's side. "I want a few good overloads out of you to make sure your spike is nice and hard before I take you to the berth and have my wicked way with you."

*Oh. Right.* Out here on the Rim, warlords used their valves. Tarn shivered. An obedient consort would be expected to stand stud.

That wasn't how things had worked in Old Vos, generally speaking, but Tarn had heard of a few patrons who preferred to use their valves, and some of Tarn's fellow cast members had been willing to indulge them in their particular tastes. And Deathsaurus...He didn't act like a rich mech with a shameful kink. He said it like a king coming to claim his due.

Just when Tarn's mouth started watering, Deathsaurus tilted his head and added, "And I want you to love every second."

Tarn's engines roared with excitement, because the only thing better than a patron was a Master. "What am I to do now?" he whispered.

Deathsaurus favoured him with a big fangy grin. "How does it feel?" he purred.

"It feels..." Tarn wondered if he dared to be honest. "My lower calipers feel good..."

"How about the middle ones?"

Tarn trembled. Deathsaurus was leading him on, and Deathsaurus would know if he lied.

"Empty, my Lord."

"Would they be better filled?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Deathsaurus's optics glittered as he went in for the kill. "Tell me what you want."

*You could have anything and you want me to tell you what I want?!*

*Of course you do.* Tarn shivered. Tarn found it difficult to talk about his sexual desires in such an open and shameless manner. Deathsaurus had sensed Tarn's weakness and, like the predator he was, he'd instinctively pounced on it.

It didn't even feel like a cold and calculated move. And none of Tarn's own cold calculations could counter it. Instinct could be as deadly as logic, and Tarn had precious little experience with an adversary who *felt* his way to victory. Mechs like Shockwave and Pharma could be convinced to behave if their schemes resulted in more losses than gains; but what could Tarn do to make Deathsaurus stop being himself?

Deathsaurus operated on gut instinct; conquest was simply in his nature. Find an opening, ruthlessly exploit it: that was just what Deathsaurus *did*.

Tarn shivered, realizing that he was in trouble. The framework of the game that gave him a plausible deniability for his desires did the same for Deathsaurus.

*You've just set the beast loose.*

Tomorrow, Tarn could claim that he didn't *really* want to submit; it was just the role he'd chosen to play. Unfortunately, Deathsaurus could also claim that he hadn't *truly* been trying to get an advantage on Tarn any way he could. If Tarn wanted Deathsaurus to accept his fiction, he'd have to accept Deathsaurus's.

*Stop this foolishness now.*

Tarn opened his mouth to tell Deathsaurus he wanted to end this game. He warmed up his vocalizer—and his subconscious took control.

"I want you to fill me," Tarn said quickly.

He heard his conscience and his common sense howling in the back of his brain. He didn't care. He wanted his hit. He wanted his binge. He wanted...what Deathsaurus could give him.

Deathsaurus's talons slid up Tarn's back.

"I want you..." Tarn felt his faceplates heat. It was wrong, to say such crude things out loud, but it also felt exciting to break taboos, to do things he never thought he would ever do. "I want you to jack into my port."

Deathsaurus's talons traced light circles on Tarn's back, weaving their way up under his tracks, and Tarn moaned. His neural net flared to life. There had to be some neural link between different areas of the body, because when Deathsaurus plucked the fine gears of his treads, Tarn swore he felt it in the top of his valve. The bottom of his valve, meanwhile, was very aware that Deathsaurus's spike was nudging slowly but surely deeper, prying Tarn's third set of calipers apart.

Pleasure loosened his vocoder. Tarn laid his head against Deathsaurus's shoulder and dimmed his optics. "I want you to upload into me until I can't take any more. I want you to make me scream for you." Deathsaurus's talons continued to caress his frame, urging him to continue. "I want to drink down your data. I want you to possess me completely. I want..."

Tarn shuddered. Once he'd gotten started, confessing his secret desires had become dangerously easy. Now he felt vulnerable. Exposed. It was both erotic and frightening. Tarn lifted his head, looked up into Deathsaurus's optics, and said, his voice quavering, "I want you to kiss me again."

Tarn wasn't sure why he felt so shaken by that final confession, but then Deathsaurus lowered his head and parted his lips and allowed just the tip of his tongue to emerge, and Tarn moved his own tongue to meet Deathsaurus in this impossibly innocent facsimile of a kiss that was nevertheless more intimate and far more devastating than the fact that they were interfacing, right now, and Tarn's fuel pump locked up in terror even as his spark expanded and his brain flashed a sudden understanding:

*You're in love with him, aren't you?*



# Concerto

## Chapter Notes

I'm so happy for all the support this story is getting and to see so many people invested in what was once a rare pair. Thank you for your kind comments, recs, reblogs, etc. They mean a lot. Enjoy!

### Chapter Fourteen: Concerto

Tarn's frame melted into Deathsaurus's embrace, and Deathsaurus felt the jack on his spike slide smoothly into the port far inside Tarn's valve. The fit was easy and natural, as though they'd been designed and built to join together this way. It felt incredible, and Deathsaurus mewled a strangled cry as he felt a data upload beginning.

What memories was he sharing with Tarn now? Most mechs had no control over the data they shared. There had been a time when Deathsaurus had not had any qualms about taking advantage of that fact. An unguarded spike in his unguarded valve meant that his allies often shared more information than they intended. Information that Deathsaurus could use to his advantage.

He'd never get that advantage with Tarn. Tarn's spike piercing prevented a full connection between jack and port when Deathsaurus took Tarn's spike.

*Which means you're a bloody idiot, giving Tarn an advantage over you without getting the same in return. Love really has made you stupid.*

Deathsaurus's overload came to a sudden and abrupt stop, choked off an instant after starting. Tarn had no such problem. Deathsaurus's virtuoso rocked back and forth hungrily, lost in sensory delights, but Deathsaurus himself felt dark thoughts dragging him down.

*What in the Pit is he hiding?*

Deathsaurus bit down on his teeth, because these thoughts were ruining what would otherwise be an incredibly erotic experience. Tarn, thankfully, was too pleasure-drunk to notice Deathsaurus's distraction. He was on the verge of overload, ready to wreck himself on Deathsaurus's spike, and even under the mask Deathsaurus could see Tarn's lips curving into a circular shape. Tarn groaned, looking for all the world like he was utterly addicted to the pleasure.

*Stop worrying about what he's hiding and start looking out for your own needs.*

*You already know no one else will.*

Deathsaurus didn't have a perfect command of his uploads, but he had more control than most, and right now he ought to be focusing on locking down his firewalls around the memories of his early life, the ones he didn't look at and rarely allowed himself to think about. There were some things that weren't for Tarn to know.

There were some wounds that left scars, like weld marks in steel. And there were others that resembled...

The only word Deathsaurus could think of was *jury-rig*. Like the overhead illumination panels in the starboard auxiliary boiler room. The room that was lit by hand-held torches hung in brackets on the walls. Deathsaurus and his crew had never been able to fix the overhead panels. Yet the boiler room glowed with light, because the torches hid the fact that the overhead panels were broken beyond repair. The torches made up for the panels that were fundamentally, irrevocably damaged.

If the workaround was good enough, there was no need to reveal the original damage, still raw after millions of years.

And sometimes Deathsaurus felt as though his psyche was riddled with patches and jury-rigs, compensations and workarounds. Much like his Warworld.

*We each have our own secrets and that's fine. Nothing wrong with mutual privacy. You don't ask what's under his mask. Play that card if he ever cares enough to ask about your history.*

Still, Deathsaurus felt uneasy. His secrets couldn't hurt Tarn—but what if Tarn's could hurt him?

*He's a consumer. Just get him so hooked on your spike and your valve that he'd do anything for more.*

That strategy would be both effective and enjoyable, so why wasn't Deathsaurus satisfied?

*Because he's supposed to be my partner, not my adversary.*

*Because I'm tired of holding him at arm's length.*

*Because I take care of the people I love.*

Deathsaurus bit down harder and tasted energon in his mouth as his fangs dug into the sides of his tongue.

*It doesn't matter if you love him. Who knows what he thinks about you? You can't gamble your crew's lives because you want him to love you back.*

*If all he wants you for is fighting and fucking, you need to be ready to protect your people.*

One of Deathsaurus's firewalls faltered.

*You know nobody could ever really love something like you.*

Deathsaurus growled and locked that firewall back up again, *tight*. Tarn grabbed hold of Deathsaurus's shoulders so hard that it hurt. He threw back his head and all but *screamed* in the throes of overload, quaking powerfully on Deathsaurus's spike. Distantly, Deathsaurus realized that Tarn must've thought the growl was a sexual expression.

Tarn sagged against Deathsaurus's chest, panting heavily, fans blasting heat. Deathsaurus hesitated just an instant.

*To the smelter with it.*

If Tarn was using him, Deathsaurus could worry about that later. Right *now*, he had an incredibly responsive, desperately turned on tank in his lap, and Deathsaurus's spike felt very good, embedded in Tarn's hot, wet, and deliciously tight valve. Why should Deathsaurus worry that Tarn was using him when he could use Tarn right back? Tarn was strangely submissive tonight and loving every second of it, and that gave Deathsaurus everything short of an embossed invitation to take full

advantage.

Life's pleasures were hard to come by, harder to keep, and always short-lived. Deathsaurus had learned that lesson well, as well as the lesson that followed: to enjoy them thoroughly when the opportunity presented itself.

Tonight, Tarn wanted to make believe that Deathsaurus was his patron and his master. Deathsaurus could be forgiven a fantasy of his own.

Deathsaurus wrapped his arms and wings around Tarn and held him gently but firmly, rocking back and forth. Tarn's usual imperious persona was nowhere to be seen. This mech seemed shaken by the intensity of their lovemaking, and Deathsaurus wanted him to feel safe. Deathsaurus could not fight his natural instinct to protect his own. And he wanted Tarn for his own. He wanted it so very, very much.

"How are you doing?" Deathsaurus murmured in Tarn's audio.

"You...you didn't overload." Tarn's voice was thin, breathy.

Deathsaurus blinked. He'd thought Tarn was too self-absorbed to notice.

Tarn continued speaking, though he couldn't meet Deathsaurus's gaze. "Did I...disappoint you?"

The stylized feathers on the back of Deathsaurus's neck prickled with warning. If this was a game, it felt very real. Deathsaurus inhaled and swore he could smell the slightest hint of fear.

*How deeply is Tarn in character?*

"Not at all," Deathsaurus purred. "I'm far from done with you."

As if on command, Tarn relaxed in his arms.

Deathsaurus couldn't quite trust that Tarn's behaviour was all just play. "Are you too tired?" he asked, giving Tarn an easy way out. "Do you need to stop?"

"No, my patron," Tarn whispered.

"Did you download something upsetting?" Deathsaurus's fuel pump skipped a beat as he remembered his earlier concerns.

"No, my patron."

Deathsaurus wished he didn't feel so relieved. "Then shall we continue?"

Tarn finally met Deathsaurus's gaze. "What would you have of me?"

"Well," Deathsaurus said, "I seem to recall I mentioned a few good overloads before I have my wicked way with you. By my count that was number three." He let his lips split into a predatory grin, and the smile came naturally. Mortilus help him, but he was starting to have fun again. His hunter's instincts spun up his systems, sending shivers of excitement down his spinal strut. "Shall we go for four?"

"Oh, my Lord," Tarn whispered. His optics were huge and filled with awe behind the mask. "Would you be so generous to me?"

Deathsaurus didn't think he'd ever get over how *into* this scenario Tarn had gotten. Enjoying the

moment got easier with every passing beat of his fuel pump.

*The past is dead and gone.*

*The future's out of sight.*

*Take this moment for all it's worth.*

“You know what happens if you do,” Deathsaurus said meaningfully. “After the fourth, your spike is mine...so if that concerns you...all you have to do is remember not to overload again.”

Tarn whimpered. “I don’t think I can do that, my patron.”

Deathsaurus chuckled. “Good.”

Tarn’s valve clenched around Deathsaurus’s spike and Deathsaurus swore he saw stars.

Oh, this interface was far too good for Deathsaurus to spoil by worrying about things he couldn’t change. Perhaps he should take a lesson from Tarn and learn how to indulge in a fantasy.

Deathsaurus dimmed his optics, pressed his lips to the slit in Tarn’s mask, and pretended that Tarn loved him back.

# Grazioso

## Chapter Fifteen: Grazioso

It didn't matter if this *love* that Tarn *perhaps* felt was real or not. It didn't matter right *now*, anyway. Tonight was a night for pleasure and make-believe, and Tarn liked the feeling of warmth in his spark just as much as he liked the feeling of Deathsaurus's spike in his valve. If tomorrow it was gone, well, tomorrow there would be no more Patron and no more Virtuoso either. Tomorrow he could figure out where the Commander of the Decepticon Justice Division and the Captain of the Warworld could go from wherever they found themselves. Tonight...

Tonight Tarn would pile fantasy on fantasy. After all, performers weren't supposed to fall in love with their patrons. But Tarn had waited millions of years to play a game that would take him as close as he dared come to his original self; and he found himself more than a little fond of the mech he was playing it with.

It was the only possible explanation for how Tarn had managed to find himself sitting in Deathsaurus's lap, impaled on Deathsaurus's spike, and yet also delicately kissing him.

Deathsaurus, for his part, didn't seem in any hurry to thrust, or to overload himself. Tarn had no idea how Deathsaurus had managed to stop himself from overloading, even after starting a data upload. Right now, he appeared quite content to hold Tarn close in his arms and rock back and forth, kissing him all the while.

Kissing was really a misnomer. The mask covered Tarn's lips and threatened to cut his tongue if he thrust anything more than the tip through the narrow opening.

Deathsaurus tasted... Dangerous. Powerful. Tarn swore he caught a hint of raw energon in the moisture on Deathsaurus's tongue. It should have worried him, but instead it excited him to be at the mercy of such a person. Deathsaurus was pure warlord: not afraid of taking a little damage as long as he got what he wanted. Tarn's valve clenched down on Deathsaurus's spike and he moaned, moving his hips, seeking pressure against his hungry nodes.

"Look at you," Deathsaurus murmured as their kiss finally broke. "Look how *beautiful* you are."

Tarn whimpered. No one had ever called him *beautiful* before. How often had he dreamed of someone talking to him that way?

"And you love to show yourself off, don't you?" Deathsaurus inquired. He reached a hand in between their bodies and took hold of the ring in Tarn's anterior node.

Tarn swore his fans hit redline when he looked down and saw Deathsaurus's fingers grasp the ring, but that couldn't be true. If it were, his fans could not have accelerated when Deathsaurus began to turn the ring, first one way, then the other. Just the way Tarn had turned it earlier when he'd let Deathsaurus watch.

Tarn scrambled to take hold of Deathsaurus's shoulders. He needed the support. The movement was clumsy and desperate, unworthy of a performer, but Deathsaurus didn't seem to care. He chuckled as though he appreciated Tarn's desperation. "You're hungry, aren't you? *Starving*." His other hand stroked the back of Tarn's helm with strange gentleness. "My poor virtuoso needs interface so *badly*."

Tarn's first instinct was to deny it. The commander of the DJD was a model of restraint. Power

carefully targeted and masterfully applied.

*But I'm not the commander tonight. I'm just...Damus.*

*And Deathsaurus is right.*

*I've waited so long for lovemaking like this.*

"Please," Tarn whispered. "I want you to make me yours."

"Oh, I will," Deathsaurus promised. "But first..." All four of his optics illuminated with savage light. "I want you to..."

He turned the ring just a little farther.

"Come."

Back the other way.

"For."

A talon stroking over Tarn's anterior node.

"Me."

Damus of Tarn obeyed. How could he not? The only pleasure he wanted in life was his patron's good regard.

His frame spasmed. His hands clutched at his lord's shoulders. He felt a warm, secure grip close around his fingers. Confused, he looked down and saw Deathsaurus's beast mode paws holding his hands as a lover would, while Deathsaurus's own hands pulled Damus's hips forwards and...

Damus's valve clenched over and over, milking the thick spike inside it, spurring Damus's pleasure to dizzying heights. Deathsaurus thrust into him wildly, positioning his hips however he pleased. Damus spread his knees as wide as he could and welcomed his Lord's possession.

Deathsaurus roared, and Damus felt his spark swell with pride and pleasure and the glorious warmth that came from being *good*, being *goodat* something, being *good for* someone, being valued, being *wanted*.

Damus abandoned himself, drinking down file after file as Deathsaurus overloaded inside his valve and poured data from his system into Damus's. Damus took in everything that Deathsaurus gave him until he collapsed, exhausted, against his Lord's chest. He breathed deeply and the air felt cold against his heated intakes. The newly downloaded files opened, and a series of disjointed visions flickered behind his optics.

Mechanism after mechanism stared at him with expressions of horror and disgust. Damus didn't recognize any of them. Nor could he tell where these images, which he presumed were memories, took place. They changed too quickly for him to be able to identify most of the settings, though he thought he recognized the meeting hall at Darkmount, and perhaps a quick glimpse into the corridors of Grindcore.

Damus wasn't sure where he was when he saw a chain pulled tight and felt his throat constrict with borrowed pain. Voices echoed in his head, spewing words of hate. Damus recoiled and clung tightly to Deathsaurus, hoping and praying that his Lord could protect him from this hostility. Hoping and

praying that his Lord would still want a mech as unworthy as he.

Damus could not understand most of what they were saying: they overlapped one another, blurring into one another, uniting into an unintelligible barrage. He caught only a single word: *monster*.

As an empurata victim, the experience was uncomfortably familiar. Yet there was a difference between Damus's own memories and Deathsaurus's. Glitch had grown well accustomed to being pitied. To so-called friends speaking down to him with condescending voices and smothering assistance. To passers-by pretending not to see him. There was no pity and no charity in these memories. Instead, there was *fear*.

The strangers talked down at him from behind reinforced barricades. Their trembling hands clutched desperately at weapons. They postured in front of their friends and taunted him from the cockpits of armed vehicles. But all their eyes glittered with a wild light that told him they would never dare say these things if they were alone and unarmed. They trusted in barriers and chains to save them.

Still... words spoken in fear were not necessarily lies. Was it not their fear that *proved* he was something monstrous?

*Why does it matter what they think?* Lightning crashed, throwing the world into stark black and white, wiping away the horrified faces and the cruel voices. Somewhere in a deep, dank pit, a creature reared up on its hind legs and howled its rage to the heedless sky. Claws raked across metal. A crude reflection in the metallic wall let the creature see itself in all its savage fury. At the top of the pit was light and rain and open sky. A crude grate kept the beast imprisoned in its hole.

*You know what they say about you. Do you believe it yourself?*

The creature looked at itself, its optics burning, and then it rose up once more and *changed*. Unsteady on two legs, it flared its wings to catch its balance and tore the chains from its body. Then it reached out for the wall again with newly discovered hands, panting from its exertion. It pulled something from a crack in the wall and folded it into its palm.

Lightning crashed again, illuminating the creature's reflection. It had four optics in this form. Four optics and a savage grin.

*I defy them.*

In its hand, a tiny twist of metal. Not a digitized passkey. A piece of junk that might, perhaps, be enough to pick a primitive lock.

It put the metal between its lips. Then it dug its talons into the metal and started to climb. Climbing towards the grate, and freedom.

Damus didn't get to find out what happened next. The memory stopped with such abrupt vehemence that Damus felt aftershocks of actual pain ripping through his sensory net. He cried out and clung tighter to his patron.

"My dear one." Deathsaurus's words seemed to come from very far away. Damus realized that Deathsaurus had never called him a pet name before. "Are you all right?"

Damus initiated a systems check. His frame quickly reported that he was in perfect shape, other than a certain tenderness in his valve—no wonder, given how he'd just used it—and the spots underneath his mask, softly nagging him as they always did, a negligible background sensation he'd learned over the centuries to ignore. The sensation of pain fled as he realized that his body was fine and the discomfort he'd experienced had been part of the download.

What had that been? It was too disjointed to be a memory. It was like a hundred memories of hatred and fear distilled down to their purest form, a concentrated poison, and piercing through the miasma was a refutation like a brilliant beacon: *I defy you*.

Damus of Tarn wondered what his life might have been like if he had been able to summon such... such...he wanted to say *courage*, but no, it wasn't about bravery. It was about the unshakable conviction that *no one else could judge him*. He could not comprehend how liberating such independence would be. Damus felt as though he'd spent all his life desperately thirsty for the approval of others.

And he was thirsty still.

"Am I..." His voice was shaky, dry. "Am I enough for you?"

*How could I be?*

"Yes," his czar in onyx purred, "oh, yes." Deathsaurus stroked his head gently with his clawed hand, and Damus of Tarn almost sobbed as he pressed his frame against his Lord's. He felt...big and bulky and awkward, as though he were in a body too large for him. But his patron did not seem to notice anything amiss. He furred his wings around Damus and held him close, stroking him gently, as though he were cherished and valued.

And Damus of Tarn let himself believe it might be true.



# Musette

## Chapter Sixteen: Musette

Deathsaurus held Tarn close to his chest. He bowed his head to the place where Tarn's neck joined his shoulder, resting his cheek against Tarn's rough tank tracks and kissing his tender throat. Deathsaurus furled his wings around them both, as though to create a private world where nothing existed but the two of them. Deathsaurus wanted to immerse his senses in the warmth of Tarn's frame and the taste of Tarn's excitement and the unique scent that was Tarn's alone.

Tarn clung to him, perhaps a little too tightly. No amount of sensory delights could stop a worry from pushing itself to the forefront of Deathsaurus's mind.

Reluctantly, Deathsaurus loosened his grip just a little. Tarn gasped and clasped tightly to the horns on Deathsaurus's chest, as though he were afraid that Deathsaurus might drop him. It could have been funny save for the fact that Deathsaurus could smell Tarn's panic and hear his engine thundering wildly in his chest.

Funny how most mechanisms felt afraid when Deathsaurus got too close to them, whereas Tarn... Tarn seemed more afraid that he would leave.

Deathsaurus stroked Tarn's head gently. The sour fear-aroma faded and Tarn's engine hummed a contented note. Still, Deathsaurus had to take responsibility for what he'd done.

"Did you download something upsetting?" he murmured, forcing himself to speak soothingly, even though the words felt like spiked barbs in his throat.

It was his own fault if Tarn had seen something unpleasant in that upload. Deathsaurus had come here tonight to share pleasure, nothing more. He should have had better self-control; he should have made sure he'd uploaded memories of no importance. Tarn was interested in his spike and his valve, not his feelings. He knew that.

*The absolute last thing you should do is remind Tarn why he has no business wanting you.*

Deathsaurus clenched his teeth.

*Maybe that's exactly what I should be doing. Put an end to this pretense. Stop torturing myself with illusions.*

It was how Deathsaurus acted with everyone else. *Let them* see him at his worst.

Deathsaurus had never had the patience to keep secrets. He couldn't imagine living on tenterhooks, waiting for truths to come out, wondering when friends might turn on him. He would *always* throw his red flags in everyone's faces. Put the facts out in public where they could be dealt with head-on. If others wanted to reject him for it, they'd go on and do it. Get it over with before Deathsaurus got too attached.

Except now. Leaning over Tarn, ruining the finish of the fancy wax that Guyhawk had coated him in, Deathsaurus found that he cared very much what Tarn thought of him. It was an uncomfortable feeling. Tarn's opinion was almost entirely out of Deathsaurus's control. Almost, but not quite. Not as long as Deathsaurus managed to deflect attention from the parts of himself that Tarn wouldn't like. He had never been much of a liar but he'd learned the art of selective omission when he'd stolen the Warworld.

He'd gotten involved with Tarn for the safety and welfare of his crew. He'd been thinking entirely of his people when he went to seal his alliance in the old-fashioned way. But he couldn't fool himself into believing that his crew had anything to do with this ongoing affair. He'd not been thinking of anyone else when he'd gone chasing after Tarn's attention. Deathsaurus had always been a terrible liar, and he was no better at lying to himself.

*You're hot for him. And that's on you.*

*But understand what price you're paying.*

*You know he has other lovers. You know you can't tell him where you came from. And you know he'll figure you out eventually and that'll be the end of it.*

*Deszaras-336.*

But a reckless impulse inside of him told him to enjoy it while it lasted. Or perhaps he already recognized that it was going to hurt when Tarn put an end to their affair.

There was no one so hard to deter as a mech with nothing to lose.

Tarn didn't seem in any hurry to leave. If anything, he clung even tighter to Deathsaurus's chest. Deathsaurus had not thought the head of the Decepticon Justice Division would be easily traumatized, but perhaps his current role, the virtuoso, was not made of such stern stuff. A charming singer in the Vosian Opera would be much more delicate.

"Tarn?" Deathsaurus prompted, and his breath caught in his throat. "My virtuoso, is something the matter?"

"No," Tarn said, his voice muffled in Deathsaurus's chest. "No, I'm all right."

Deathsaurus bit his lip. "What did you see when you downloaded those files?"

Tarn lifted his head and touched Deathsaurus's cheek. "I saw that my czar in onyx is a very admirable Decepticon."

Deathsaurus blinked. He hadn't been expecting a reply like that. "Oh?"

Tarn chuckled. "My Lord, I hadn't taken you as the type to fish for flattery." His optics sparkled. Deathsaurus realized that Tarn was gently teasing him.

Ordinarily Deathsaurus would be charmed to see Tarn feeling playful, but he felt confused, and that set him on edge. Every time he didn't understand what was happening, he felt as though a hidden danger could be threatening him or his crew. It was his job to see threats coming and deal with them. He would not let his people suffer for his ignorance.

"I'm just not sure what you mean," Deathsaurus said guardedly. "What did you see?"

"I'm not certain," Tarn replied. "The images changed very rapidly. Most of what I recall is a *feeling*. My lord, you have a powerful conviction that no outsider will ever tell you your worth."

Deathsaurus felt a wave of relief pass through his spark. Oh, he'd dodged a bullet there. He'd never take another gamble like that again. There was no way he'd ever be so lucky twice.

"And you find that trait appealing, do you?" Deathsaurus purred. He wasn't so sure Tarn did. Tarn's entire job consisted of deciding who was worthy and who was not.

“You know who you are and what you value,” Tarn replied. “My czar, if you would value me, I would follow you anywhere.”

Deathsaurus felt a cold shiver run up his spinal strut, even though he realized that Tarn must still be playing the game of virtuoso and patron. No, he could not count that Tarn’s words were true.

If he was curious what Tarn truly thought...well, if Tarn truly thought anything bad, he would have lost his taste for their game. Clearly Tarn still desired Deathsaurus enough to want to keep playing. That ought to be good enough.

Deathsaurus felt another sensation shoot through his neural net. This time it felt like heat and desire.

Because if their game was still ongoing...well, Tarn had just experienced his fourth overload. That meant that it was time for Deathsaurus to get what he wanted.

Deathsaurus trembled with a heady sensation of mingled anticipation and uncertainty. Could he really do this? Could he really treat the commander of the Decepticon Justice Division as his stud?

The idea was *ridiculously* exciting. He felt his valve flood with lubricant at the very *thought*.

But there were some thoughts that made for very appealing fantasies which Deathsaurus would never dream of indulging in real life. Fragging on a battlefield, for one. It was exciting to imagine... desperately milking his mate’s spike while explosions shook the ground, fragging hard and fast lest the enemy stumble across them in coitus...but foolish to attempt in reality. It was inviting that enemy to find them and kill them. Deathsaurus would never risk his mate, or his own life, for such a transient thrill.

Was this a similar gamble?

*What’s the worst that could happen?*

Tarn could decide he didn’t like it. Decide to punish Deathsaurus for it. Decide to remind Deathsaurus who was in charge by opening a comm channel and driving his fatal voice into the audios of Deathsaurus’s crew. Into their very sparks.

Deathsaurus shivered. *He won’t hurt your crew. It’s the terms of your alliance. He needs their help to bring down Megatron.* No, he didn’t have to be afraid of that. He trusted Tarn not to hurt his crew. Tarn needed them too much.

He wasn’t so sure he trusted Tarn not to snap and take it out on *him*, but Deathsaurus was willing to take that risk. It might be unwise, but...

...but he was an MTO and he’d taken very few gambles for his own sake before. Hed done very little solely for himself. Was this so much to ask—one night of fun with a lover?

Deathsaurus licked his lips. “Will you follow me to the berth?”

Tarn locked optics with him—his upper set, not his lower—and Deathsaurus felt his spark rise up into his throat. Tarn wasn’t supposed to know which optics were his primaries.

Too far. He’d trusted Tarn much too far.

“Yes, my czar,” Tarn whispered. He bowed his head submissively, and Deathsaurus felt his valve clench hard on nothing as he watched his beautiful mate brace himself against Deathsaurus’s chest horns and rise shakily to his feet.

*You did that. You did that to him.*

Fluids streaked Tarn's thighs. Tarn did not close his valve panel, choosing to leave it open and display the aftereffects of Deathsaurus's handiwork. Tarn trembled, his fans still rotating on a high setting, and Deathsaurus supposed he could be at least a little bit gentle. He would let Tarn rest on his back for what was to come.

Deathsaurus got up in a single graceful movement. He took Tarn's hand in his own and tugged gently. Tarn mewed his appreciation and followed obediently as Deathsaurus led him to the berth.

Deathsaurus's wing feathers clattered together. He wondered if Tarn knew how nervous he felt.

Tarn was a lot stronger than Deathsaurus's previous lovers. His frame could take a lot more punishment. It wouldn't even be *punishment*—it would feel as good to Tarn as it did to Deathsaurus, if their previous encounter had been any indication. That encounter had resulted in a broken berth and quite honestly the best frag of Deathsaurus's life.

This evening was already a strong runner-up and now...now Deathsaurus was about to get exactly what he liked best of all.

*You shouldn't be doing this, you uppity animal*, said the voice in Deathsaurus's head. *Look at him. Look at you. You've got no right to take your pleasure of him. You've got no right to taint him. He's too good for you.*

Deathsaurus took his mind off Tarn for just one moment. Just long enough to turn his head and imagine that voice had a face. That it belonged to a single entity standing at the side of the berth, observing them and judging them.

Deathsaurus flashed that voice a big, smug grin.

*He's too good for me, and I'm going to fuck him anyway*, Deathsaurus thought. *And all you can do is watch.*

Then Deathsaurus shoved those dark thoughts from his mind and turned his attention to a much more enjoyable thought: the leader of the Decepticon Justice Division, *his virtuoso*, standing obediently next to his luxurious berth, his frame already marked from their interfacing, head bowed, eager to serve. Tarn's fans rotated in a steady rhythm as he awaited his patron's command.

"Lay down and make yourself comfortable," Deathsaurus urged.

Tarn obeyed. He settled himself in the middle of the berth with a soft pillow under his head. He stretched out his frame as though he were a much smaller mech displaying himself for a lover to admire, running his hands along his sides as if to show off his aerodynamics. He caught Deathsaurus's optics and held his gaze as he spread his thighs. Deathsaurus broke the gaze in order to watch those pretty legs open wide for him.

*Incongruous how a mechanism with so much raw power at his command enjoys the role of the prey.*

That was Deathsaurus's survival instinct again, looking for anything that seemed out of the ordinary, flagging it for analysis by the conscious mind, tagging it, as always, with *query: threat?*

*Strange* did not always mean *dangerous* and right now, Deathsaurus didn't care if it did. He told his survival instincts to shut up. Let him enjoy the sight of the head of the DJD lounging seductively in his own berth, trying to tempt Deathsaurus into accepting him as stud.

Deathsaurus circled the berth and leaned down low over his prey. Tarn whimpered low in his throat as Deathsaurus dipped his lips to Tarn's audio and whispered, "Open your spike panel."

## Accelerando

### Chapter Seventeen: Accelerando

Tarn obeyed, as any virtuoso would obey his patron, and snapped his spike panel open. Tarn was glad he'd polished the golden piercing through the head of his spike. It glittered in the dim lighting of his room as his spike emerged cautiously, slowly coming into view.

Tarn felt a sudden spear of panic lance his spark.

For millions of years he'd used his valve with Megatron, and his spike with all the rest of his lovers. His mind had formed associations accordingly. When he had a pretty pet to toy with, his spike got hard. When his Lord demanded his valve, he got wet.

Deathsaurus's patron persona had definitely gotten him wet. But now it was time to use his spike. He was having a little difficulty wrapping his mind around how he was going to do so submissively.

*You've spiked him before*, Tarn told himself, but the argument wasn't convincing. He'd spiked Deathsaurus when he'd been trying to frag some shame into him. Trying to emphasize to the rogue warlord that Tarn was in control. It had backfired spectacularly. In Deathsaurus's twisted mind, valves were for masters and spikes were for subordinates, and all Tarn had succeeded in doing was....

...well, honestly, mind-blowing interface wasn't that bad of a consolation prize.

But he'd encouraged Deathsaurus to be more assertive. Now Tarn found himself in this awkward position, with Deathsaurus looming over him, playing the role of czar to the hilt, and expecting Tarn to do something he'd never done before.

Tarn wished he could just lie back and let Deathsaurus pound his valve. That was what Megatron had always done. Tarn knew exactly what kind of little noises his Lord liked to hear. Tarn knew how to let his frame go limp while his lips babbled praise. Tarn also knew he would get off on that, easily and often.

But that wasn't what Deathsaurus wanted. Tarn was in no position to complain, either; his valve was already tender from use. He tried to tell himself that any more valve interface would hurt, but he couldn't convince himself to care, not when he knew the sublime sensation of suffering for his Lord. Unfortunately, Deathsaurus's optics were locked on his spike. All four of them.

Tarn felt suddenly terrified that he would fail. That he would disappoint.

A stud needed a firm spike. Tarn looked up at Deathsaurus looming over him and stirred up all the fantasies he'd indulged in while in this bed alone—daydreams of Deathsaurus shoving him down, mounting him, claiming him as his own. He tried to route his feelings of arousal into his spike instead of his well-used valve.

“What have you got for me?” Deathsaurus purred. He slunk onto the bed in a movement that just screamed predator—on all fours between Tarn's spread legs, spine curved, wings half-spread. He looked at Tarn and licked his lips.

Tarn whimpered. “Take what you want,” he whispered, because he didn't know what else to do.

Deathsaurus planted his knees on the berth and lifted his hands from the bed. *Reared up on his hind*

*legs* flashed through Tarn's mind. Even in his robot mode, Deathsaurus was a beast. Tarn shivered with an emotion that now felt all too familiar—a twisted cocktail of revulsion and arousal.

Deathsaurus's talons skated over the insides of Tarn's thighs. "Wider," the warlord said. "Spread them wider."

Tarn moaned and obeyed.

"Good."

Tarn gasped. The praise—the praise did it for him. His fans whirled higher, blasting away heat. His spike finally showed some signs of interest.

*Please. Tell me how I can earn your praise.*

Deathsaurus lowered his head and in a sudden, shocking motion, licked the underside of Tarn's spike from base to tip.

Tarn cried out, because he'd in no way expected that, and Deathsaurus hadn't even given him any warning. He'd just *helped himself*.

Tarn dug his fingers into the bedding at his sides, because that thought was really turning him on. Deathsaurus continued to take what he wanted as he slid the head of Tarn's spike into his mouth and sucked lightly.

By Mortilus, it felt good! Tarn couldn't stop his spike from hardening, not when Deathsaurus's mouth was so gloriously wet. Tarn thrust his hips, trying to get more, but Deathsaurus just grinned and lifted his head just as far as Tarn could lift his hips, making sure only the tip of Tarn's spike stayed inside his mouth. Tarn couldn't help making a whimpering sound when his efforts for more rewarded him with exactly nothing. His patron was a cruel tease!

Tarn grunted, thrusting harder. Deathsaurus responded by digging his talons into Tarn's hips and pinning him to the berth while he continued to suck just the tip of Tarn's spike. His tongue toyed with the piercing in the head of Tarn's spike, but he didn't lick any further down the shaft.

Tarn couldn't help loving it, even as his frame ached for more. The thirst to plunge his entire spike into something tight and wet—mouth, valve, Tarn didn't care—overcame his thoughts. He *wanted* and he was denied, for his Lord's entertainment, and his Lord took pleasure from his suffering.

He wondered if Deathsaurus would like to hear him beg. He wondered if begging would do any good.

"Please," Tarn said tentatively. "Please, I'll do anything."

"Ah," Deathsaurus said as he let Tarn's spike drop from his lips.

Tarn mewled with undisguised agony. He'd made a mistake! His begging hadn't pleased his Lord at all. Now he was being punished by losing even the little bit of stimulation he'd been given previously.

Deathsaurus ran a taloned finger up the length of Tarn's aching hard spike, tracing the route previously taken by his tongue. "I see you're ready now," Deathsaurus purred. "Ready to serve me."

"Do what you will with me, my Lord," Tarn murmured, trapped helplessly between hope and despair. "You virtuoso..." His voice faltered. He wasn't used to his voice failing him. Tarn cleared

his throat and tried again. “Your virtuoso is here for your pleasure.”

Deathsaurus stalked forward on all fours, digging his talons into the tank tracks over Tarn’s shoulders and planting his knees on either side of Tarn’s hips. Tarn whimpered, feeling his legs forced together even as he tried to spread them wide. It felt better, to spread them wide, but now he couldn’t quite do it. He wasn’t sure if the restriction was frustrating or arousing. Maybe the truth was somewhere in the middle.

Deathsaurus released his right hand long enough to reach down and snap open his valve panel. Lubricant splattered across Tarn’s spike, sliding down its length, pattering on his abdomen.

*I suppose there’s no question that Deathsaurus is aroused.*

Deathsaurus dug his right hand’s claws back into Tarn’s shoulder again and Tarn moaned. Pain and pleasure chased themselves across his neural net. Deathsaurus flared his wings and lowered his hips.

Tarn felt that wet, delicious valve nudge the top of his spike and he swore he saw stars.

He thrust upwards, chasing the sensation, but Deathsaurus wouldn’t let him enter. The rogue warlord wriggled his hips, rubbing his node back and forth against the head of Tarn’s spike, as though Tarn’s spike were merely a pleasure wand and Deathsaurus was all alone, stimulating himself with his plaything.

*Primus preserve me.*

Tarn was beginning to get an inkling of how to use his spike submissively, and he wasn’t sure his frame would be able to withstand what Deathsaurus had in mind.



# Marcia alla Turca

## Chapter Notes

Note on this chapter: Deathsaurus has antisocial personality traits. Having traits is not the same as having a personality disorder. Deathsaurus knows what his thought patterns are like and has the self control to think twice before acting on his initial impulses. That being said, making good decisions isn't always \*easy,\* and this chapter reflects how a person's ethics can diverge from their initial impulses or even their wants. TL:DR - Deathsaurus is not a "nice" person; if he's a "good" person, it's due to will, self-control, ethics, and sober second thought.

## Chapter Eighteen: Marcia alla Turca

Deathsaurus threw back his head and enjoyed the feeling of Tarn's hard, firm spike rubbing against his swollen anterior node. He pumped his hips, changing the sensation until...*oh, there*. Yes, he liked that.

So he savoured his pleasure.

Ordinarily he did this mostly to tease. This time he was also doing it to reassure himself that the mech under him really wanted what he was about to do. Most of his crew weren't shy about asking for him to take their spikes, but Tarn was a different sort.

Tarn seemed very fond of giving Deathsaurus blanket permission to *do whatever he pleased with him*. The lack of specifics was distressing. Deathsaurus had never met a mech who was up for literally *anything*, at all times, in all circumstances. Deathsaurus had to observe Tarn's responses carefully to be certain he wasn't taking advantage of that open-ended consent. For example, the way that Tarn was whimpering and thrusting upwards with his hips made it clear that he wanted his spike inside Deathsaurus's valve, right now.

But Deathsaurus wasn't quite ready to give Tarn what he so clearly wanted. Rubbing his anterior node against Tarn's spike felt *really* good. Far better than it ought to. There was a deliciously hard spot on the head of Tarn's spike that was small enough to hit Deathsaurus's anterior node *just so* and it felt *amazing* and what was the point of being in control if you couldn't achieve your desires? Tarn seemed to *want* him to be capricious and indulgent. So, he indulged.

Deathsaurus felt a little bit bad about Tarn's needy moaning, but he dimmed his optics and settled into rub his node back and forth, back and forth. *Yeah*, that was good.

Tarn's fans blasted hot air up against Deathsaurus's chest and shoulders. Deathsaurus sank his talons into Tarn's tank tracks and grinned. It seemed that dear Tarn was getting off on being tormented this way. *Someone* apparently had an overload denial kink.

Wasn't it nice when both people were having fun?

Deathsaurus changed the angle of his valve just slightly and gasped as the new pressure made him see supernovae in all four optics. Primus, what *was* that? *So* good against his node.

Then something else started flashing in the corner of his optics. Amber warning lights.

Deathsaurus bit his lip. What in the Pit was wrong with his brain? If it wasn't his conscience, worried about how he was treating Tarn, then it was his stupid predator's instincts, shrieking at him every time they didn't understand something, flaring phantom danger warnings through his systems. But of course he'd never get his pleasure until he figured out...

*Oh . Deathsaurus lifted his valve away so that he could look at Tarn's spike. He realized immediately what felt so great. That hard little protrusion was Tarn's spike piercing.*

Deathsaurus ground his teeth together. He reached out a hand and toyed with the barbell. Gold metal through the head of Tarn's spike. It must have hurt. Deathsaurus didn't think he'd enjoy having such a piercing done. Didn't understand how Tarn could have.

*Or maybe it's a means to an end.*

Trading temporary pain for long term goals...that was something Deathsaurus understood.

Because as long as that gold barbell ran through the head of Tarn's spike, Tarn's jack would never seat itself fully in Deathsaurus's—or anyone else's—port. Tarn would never upload any data. Any memories. Tarn clearly didn't count on his partners having port guards. No, he safeguarded his privacy by ensuring he couldn't upload anything. Deathsaurus could respect that kind of thoroughness. But the emotion uppermost in his mind was not admiration.

*I've had about enough of his hiding. Hiding his face behind a mask. Hiding his memories behind this.*

Deathsaurus wrapped his talons around the ball on the tip. The ball he'd been rubbing against his node.

*You could take it out.*

*You could remove it, and then you could swallow his spike up with your valve. Jam his jack into your port. There'd be nothing to interfere with a download then. Pin him down and frag him till he overloads. Maybe you could finally see his memories.*

*Finally see who he is under the mask.*

Tarn whimpered. Thrashed. "My patron, take me....take me, *please*..."

*And I bet he's too far gone to argue with you.*

Deathsaurus felt appalled at his own capacity for cruelty.

The middle of interface play was not really the best time to ask a mech to make a decision. Tarn was obviously not thinking straight and Deathsaurus was doing everything he could to keep it that way. Deathsaurus should wait before asking about the possibility of removing the piercing. Or maybe he should just respect Tarn's privacy.

*What's the use of respect when your crew's lives could hinge on what you know?*

Or was Deathsaurus simply using his crew to rationalize what he himself wanted?

*I want Tarn spread out under me. His memories open to my search programs. His mask on the floor. Bared body, mind and soul.*

*He told you to do whatever you wanted to him, didn't he? It's his own fault if he doesn't like what you do with that blanket permission. It was his own mistake to trust you.*

But his heart would not accept the argument his brain set forth.

*I don't want to hurt Tarn.*

*But I want to see him. To know him. To take his measure. No more secrets. I want the truth.*

*At what cost?*

Deathsaurus felt a powerful sensation surging in his fuel lines, and it wasn't lust. Not desire in a sexual sense. It was a thirst for power, for absolute control and unshakeable security, for total domination. Thrills of excitement ran up and down his spinal strut, threatening to drown out the sensations from his valve completely. Power-control-dominance was its own drug. Its own intoxicant.

*What price do you pay for a hit, if Tarn never wants to be near you again?*

*What about your own morality? Your belief in free consent?*

*Master yourself, you bloody animal.*

Deathsaurus gritted his teeth. It wasn't enough. His blood was up; his brain was dumping adrenaloids into his system. His fuel pump beat hard and fast. Tarn's scent was in his nose and mouth, so thick he could taste it. His optics brightened all colours, deepened all shadows, magnified all movement. He was a predator in full hunting mode and he had his prey pinned beneath him. It would be so easy to have what he wanted. So easy to just *take*.

Deathsaurus pulled his lower lip into his mouth and bit down hard. Fuel exploded in his mouth. Pain was an anchor calling him back to himself.

No, he wasn't going to do anything without Tarn's full and enthusiastic consent. He wasn't *that* variety of monster.

But if he wanted it to stay that way, then he needed to stop teasing *himself*. Get Tarn's piercing out of his sight and out of his easy reach. Before he capitulated to his predator's instincts which, he had to admit, had always served him well before. They'd kept him, and his crew, alive against terrible odds. And now he was ignoring them for the sake of ethics that he might not be able...or willing...to afford.

Tarn's optics flickered erratically through the holes in his mask. He kept turning his head, to the left, then to the right, then back to the left again, as though by changing its position he could end Deathsaurus's sexual torment. "My czar, please...please take me...my czar, *I beg of you!*"

Deathsaurus reached out with his left hand and cupped Tarn's cheek, pulling his head upright so Tarn had to look him in the optics. He must make a ghoulish sight—he could feel his own fuel running down his chin, and he knew there would be fuel on his teeth, too. His long, sharp teeth. He grinned at Tarn.

Tarn gasped. And then moaned a single word.

"Please."

If Tarn still wanted him, Deathsaurus wasn't going to give him time to change his mind. Deathsaurus

lowered himself quickly, rolling his hips. He bit his tongue when he felt the piercing slide over his anterior node, a dark and dangerous temptation. He leaned his frame forward and felt the reward. Tarn's spike head settled at the opening of his valve.

Deathsaurus pressed down. Tarn whimpered with need and thrust his hips up, as much as he could with Deathsaurus on top of him. Tarn's spike head slipped into Deathsaurus's valve.

That piercing would be safely out of Deathsaurus's reach when it was buried deep inside him.

Deathsaurus's hungry valve devoured Tarn's spike, swallowing up almost half of it in a single thrust. Tarn *screamed*, a cry of delight that fed Deathsaurus's pleasure—which pleasure, Deathsaurus did not know. Tarn's spike felt delicious in his valve, rubbing against the nodes inside. Tarn's frame convulsing helplessly beneath him stroked the animal in Deathsaurus that wanted to dominate its prey. Deathsaurus swore he felt that scream echoing in his spark.

Deathsaurus loomed over Tarn and snarled a single word. "Mine."

Tarn overloaded.

His second scream was even louder. Even sweeter.

# Aria

## Chapter Notes

I'm so happy to hear that readers are enjoying Deathsaurus's backstory and history...yes, there will be more! But for now, it's Tarn's turn....

### Chapter Nineteen: Aria

*It was never like this with Megatron.*

Long ago Tarn had made a rule for himself: to avoid thinking about Megatron when he was in the berth with someone else.

He'd mostly succeeded in convincing himself that Megatron didn't care who he used his spike with. Megatron had never shown any interest in his spike. Though Tarn had sworn his fealty to Megatron over and over again, Megatron had never asked him for sexual fidelity. Which meant that Megatron surely didn't care if Tarn took a pleasure-pet or two. Megatron had Tarn to serve at his amusement; and Tarn, in turn, had his own little pets. Such was the natural order of things.

Yet if Tarn thought about Megatron when he had one of his pets straddling his lap or kneeling before him, he could never quite shake the feeling that he was cheating. That feeling always soured the mood. So Tarn had created that rule for himself and obeyed it scrupulously...until now.

There was no way that Tarn could contort his thoughts enough to convince himself that Deathsaurus was his pet. His or anyone else's. Tarn had initially settled his alliance with Deathsaurus by agreeing that they would be equals, though he'd expected that Deathsaurus would grasp the subtext: a field marshal was always subordinate to an Emperor.

Deathsaurus had *not* grasped the subtext.

And now Deathsaurus had made a pet of *Tarn*.

Maybe it was Tarn's own fault for disguising his spark's desire as a game. Could he really fault Deathsaurus for playing his part to the hilt? For a mech who was such a poor liar, Deathsaurus had certainly mastered his role. It was as though it came naturally to him. As though he'd stopped playing and let his true self loose.

Just as Tarn had.

Tarn had started—for the first time, with Deathsaurus—speaking from his heart.

And Deathsaurus was *magnificent*. Tarn had to face facts: he had a kink for dangerous and authoritative mechs. For good or ill, Deathsaurus was nothing if not a warlord.

Tarn could not think of anywhere in the universe he'd rather be right now than here, flat on his back in his own berth, his fans blasting hot air, his systems straining after his overload, Deathsaurus's talons pinning his tracked shoulders to the slab, Deathsaurus's ravenous valve still devouring his spike. No, not even under Megatron. Not even if Megatron still wore the Decepticon insignia.

Megatron had never looked at him like this. Admiringly, yes, and encouragingly, and approvingly, and Damus of Tarn had swallowed up that admiration, that encouragement, and that approval the way a starved mechanism gulped down fuel. Damus of Tarn had thought such looks were the most he could ever expect to earn from anyone.

Deathsaurus looked at him with... Tarn struggled for metaphors. *The intensity of a laser locked onto its target* came close. *A predator's hunger* did too, though, no predator was ever so concerned with the pleasure of its prey. Tarn was the absolute focus of Deathsaurus's attention, pinned in his crosshairs, and yes, it sent a shiver of danger down Tarn's spine, and yes, the danger made it better.

*Mine* .

Megatron had used the same word; but Tarn knew that *mine* meant something entirely different to Deathsaurus. To Deathsaurus the word was weighted with allegiance and obligation. Deathsaurus had defied Megatron for the people who were *his*. If Primus were real, Tarn had no doubt that Deathsaurus would defy God Himself.

Tarn wondered who had built Deathsaurus. What mind had devised a creature of such terrible glory? Tarn wondered if Deathsaurus's creator had been prepared for the reality of his creation. Somehow, he doubted it.

Nobody built someone like *that* and just *abandoned* them.

Deathsaurus, like Megatron, had the manner of a person whose freedom was hard fought and dearly won. It was the opposite of a young virtuoso's coddled lifestyle. Young Damus had worked so hard to escape the city of his birth and earn his entry into the ivory towers of Vos where he would be admired and taken care of. And yet here he was—lost in the black on the Galactic Rim, riding the sharp edge of the night with his czar in onyx, the renegade Lord of Beasts.

Tarn had never felt so alive.

Forget Megatron, then. Tarn had no obligations to the mech who'd thrown him away; and it remained to be seen whether the institution of the Decepticon Justice Division was strong enough to stand without Megatron's might as its foundation. Before long Tarn would prove that Decepticon justice applied to Megatron as much as anyone; or he would be destroyed in the discovery that it did not.

Maybe it was that knowledge that made Tarn so reckless. Or maybe it was the realization that he'd almost died by his own hand before he'd found the courage—granted to him by Nickel—to pick himself up and try again. To dare to trust that the Decepticon Cause might outlive its creator.

Or maybe it was *Deathsaurus*, whose destiny had given him a life in service to his creator—like all MTOs—and who'd faced the universe with a crooked smile and a clenched fist and *taken* instead. Could Tarn do any less? Pick himself up from Megatron's betrayal, dust himself off, and then go out and *get* all those things he'd dreamed of having someday. He would not wait for someday any longer. He would not wait for someone else to give him his dreams.

No, Tarn could not regret his current position. Not even if it killed him.

Deathsaurus looked down at him with a wicked, wicked smile. "You just overloaded," his Czar in Onyx murmured, "and I can already feel your spike firming up again."

His spike was currently half-hilted in Deathsaurus's valve. Tarn would very much like it buried all the way. But such a choice was not his to make. It was Deathsaurus's...and Deathsaurus had seen fit

to take his time.

*Megatron had never had such patience. To make a toy of me.*

“You’re just so eager to serve,” Deathsaurus purred. “My virtuoso.”

Tarn’s systems flared with heat. The sound of his fans rose from a roar to a shriek. He swore his mouth dropped open.

He swore Deathsaurus’s optics gleamed with hungry light.

“And you’re doing such a *good job*,” Deathsaurus added.

Tarn moaned. He couldn’t help himself. His spike grew achingly hard, and the soft embrace of Deathsaurus’s valve was no longer enough. He wanted Deathsaurus to clench his calipers together. He wanted Deathsaurus to swallow him whole. He wanted Deathsaurus to ride him hard, use him up, wear him out...and tell him he’d done well.

“Oh,” Deathsaurus said. From anyone else it would be a mild expression of observation. His grin grew wider. He winked his lower left optic, as though sharing a secret.

Tarn felt as though Deathsaurus could see right through his mask. Right through his frame to his very spark.

*He’s figured it out. He knows praise turns me on. And he’s let me know that he knows.*

“Is *that* why.” Deathsaurus leaned over. His long tongue slid through his lips to lap at the base of Tarn’s throat. “Is that why a mech with a song like yours chooses to sing for my pleasure instead?”

*Stop this game before it gets out of hand.*

Tarn’s spark flared in protest. No, he wasn’t going to listen to his rational mind. If he wanted to be rational, he’d admit that his playtime with Deathsaurus went out of his control a long time ago. He would rather be honest and admit that he liked it that way.

Deathsaurus whispered in his audio, “I’d like another encore, my virtuoso.”

Tarn stared up at his ally. His *lover*. The beastformer was glorious. Wild and proud and completely unapologetic, unashamedly and fiercely *himself*.

“I’d love nothing more than to give it to you,” Tarn whispered, and meant every word.

Deathsaurus moved his hips. Just a little. Just enough to drag Tarn’s spike down to the very opening of his valve, and then ease it back in. Another slow, sinuous pump and it slid a little deeper. A third, and Tarn felt a caliper nudge open.

*Primus preserve me.*

“D-deathsaur,” Tarn stammered, and had to stop to gasp for air.

“Poor virtuoso.” Deathsaurus did not sound particularly pitying. *Amused* might be a better word. “Is my name too difficult for you?”

Tarn shook his head. He was filled with absolute panic at the thought of letting Deathsaurus down.

Deathsaurus flashed a sly grin. “I suppose if you can manage three syllables, I’m not doing it right.”

He fluttered the calipers in his valve, to leave no doubt whatsoever what *it* was.

Tarn considered begging for mercy, realized he didn't want it, and lifted his hand instead, to grasp at Deathsaurus's wrist, as if he could draw strength from his powerful lover.

Deathsaurus leaned over again and whispered, "You can call me Des."

"My Lord," Tarn mewled.

Deathsaurus fluttered his calipers again.

"Des," Tarn gasped.

Deathsaurus purred, and let Tarn's spike slide a little deeper into his valve. Another pair of calipers gripped the head of Tarn's spike, quivering against his piercing, making his whole frame thrill with sensation.

*This is the reward of good service* , Tarn thought dizzily.

"Des," Tarn repeated. "My czar in onyx."

"Tarn," Deathsaurus trilled. "My virtuoso."



# Bard

## Chapter Notes

This chapter has a few callbacks to my fic "Band of Brothers," where Leozack and Lyzack first met Deathsaurus. Other parts of Deathsaurus's history are just hinted at...so far.

### Chapter Twenty: Bard

*It's easy*, Leozack had said. *Just treat others the way you'd like them to treat you.*

It turned out that it was not so easy for Deathsaurus after all.

In his early years, Deathsaurus had been... Tarn would use flowery language like *poorly socialized*. Deathsaurus thought it simpler to say *an abject monster* and be done with it. He saw no reason to soften the truth to spare anyone's feelings.

Deathsaurus did not play the files containing his earliest memories. He did not know if they were intact any more or not.

The earliest files that he dared open were fragmented now. Sometimes they were nothing but a taste, or a smell. Sometimes they were without sound. Sometimes they began in the middle of a scene, or ended abruptly. But they all had similar themes.

Screams of hatred and fear. Laser blasts, angry crowds. Mechanisms running in terror.

Hunger in his belly. Wrath in his spark.

Deathsaurus had eventually found himself on the battlefield, in the swath of no mech's land in between the warring Decepticon and Autobot armies. This, it turned out, was an excellent place for a creature such as himself to find fuel. When there weren't fresh Autobot kills to drain, there were always corpses to scavenge. He was far less picky about faction with the dead than with the living.

With the living, he'd been observant enough to recognize that making enemies of both factions would put him in twice the danger. The brand on his chest made the Decepticons—not friendly, exactly. He could smell their fear. Hear their threats. But if he didn't approach them, they left him alone. That was good enough.

Deathsaurus learned by observing and one of the things he observed was that most mechs had special connections to certain other mechanisms. Not to all; only to some. Deathsaurus watched as Decepticon soldiers laughed together. He smelled their fear when their special associates were injured. He heard their sobs of grief when these comrades died.

Deathsaurus made a few clumsy attempts at such connections. Most of the other Decepticons were afraid of him. One mech reached out to him, though, and...

It ended badly. Worse for Scimitar than for Deathsaurus, in the end. But badly enough for Deathsaurus to learn more important lessons. People had ulterior motives for their behaviour. Relationships were not for such as he.

Not for monsters.

Deathsaurus decided to focus his efforts instead on learning to change shape. Such an ability would be far more useful to him. Perhaps he could blend into crowds without anyone taking notice of him. The other Decepticons seemed to change shape so easily. It was not so easy for Deathsaurus, but in the end, it was very rewarding.

No sooner had Deathsaurus managed his first few transformations than something new caught his predator's senses. Two mechanisms. Twins, with a split spark. They were fleeing from mechs in the employ of Shockwave, who wanted the two caught and brought to Shockwave's lab. The two were running because they were afraid of what would happen to them there. Deathsaurus heard their whispers. Smelled their fear.

Deathsaurus had little use for other beings save as sources of food, but these two...

Understanding was a hot, bright flash in Deathsaurus's brain. The twins did not want to be the subject of experiments. And Deathsaurus *understood why not*.

Understanding, it turned out, was very different from knowing. Knowledge could be dry and distant. Understanding involved a certain degree of borrowed emotion. Deathsaurus could feel the echo of their fear inside his own spark. He remembered what it was like to be so afraid.

Was this what that *connection* felt like?

Deathsaurus took it upon himself to interfere with Shockwave's plan. He convinced Windsweeper, one of Shockwave's thugs, that the two runaways were actually two of Scimitar's former soldiers. The two griffins, Leozack and Lyzack, had been killed on the battlefield just days before. They would not return to contest Deathsaurus's word. Windsweeper believed Deathsaurus's claim and departed, to seek for the twins elsewhere. Deathsaurus was left with two terrified jets under his wings.

The one who took the name Lyzack was good with computers. She hacked the Decepticon registry to make a few useful edits. Soon she and her brother were officially registered, by spark signature, as Lyzack and Leozack. Similarly, Deathsaurus was now Scimitar.

Before leaving Cybertron with the stolen Warworld, Deathsaurus had looked at the registry of Decepticons one last time, just for a laugh. The two split-sparked twins were still listed missing in action. There had never been a registry entry for Deszaras-336. And Scimitar (Deathsaurus), Leozack and Lyzack were listed as officers, alive and well, when the original owners of those names were long since rust.

Lyzack was the twin gifted with technology, but it had been Leozack who had taken it upon himself to give Deathsaurus specialized tutoring in How To Be A Person 101. Leozack had taught Deathsaurus all about the social norms in the Decepticon army and encouraged him to practice until he could change shape and walk into an armory or a bar without sending the other inhabitants running away from the *ferocious beast*.

Deathsaurus did not want to be ungrateful, but Leozack's advice was occasionally flawed. For example, when Deathsaurus treated other people as he wished to be treated, they often reacted poorly.

Deathsaurus liked to know the cold, hard facts of a situation. When he was given partial truths or lies instead, his strategies did not work. No wonder, when he'd made strategic and tactical decisions based on inaccurate beliefs about the situation. He could not care less if the truth was unpleasant, so

long as it was reliable.

So Deathsaurus answered others' questions honestly, and he felt very impatient when other mechs lashed out at him because they found his words offensive, aggressive, or hurtful. Why did they waste his time talking to him, then, if they didn't really want to hear what he had to say?

Leozack tried to explain that these people weren't truly looking for honesty or solutions. They were seeking encouragement or reassurance or possibly just someone to listen to them. Deathsaurus didn't understand in the slightest. Why didn't they ask for what they wanted, then? What value could there be in an audience?

People were irrational and foolish and he had very little time for most of them. Their so-called manners meant that their words could not be trusted. In return, Deathsaurus could not find it in him to care about strangers' opinions. They could all go straight to the Pit for all the difference it made to him.

But for Leozack and Lyzack he would face down Unicron himself. No one would harm his family. They were *his*, the one source of warmth in an infinity of cold darkness, and he would rather die for them than live without them.

Leozack said that there was something wrong in his head, or in his spark. That he wasn't wired properly. Deathsaurus had already accepted that statement as truth long before he'd met the twins. Loathsome abnormalities were the stuff of which monsters were made.

But Lyzack had taken his beast head into her lap and stroked him behind the spines. "What you need to do," she murmured, "is treat others the way *they* would like to be treated."

Deathsaurus still remembered his feeling of incredulity, irritation, and, yes, the smallest stabbing reminder that he was, and would always be, an outsider. "I can't read minds," he'd said, not even bothering to suppress his frustration. "How am I supposed to know what someone else secretly wants?"

"I thought Leozack was teaching you how typical people behave."

Deathsaurus snorted. Lyzack must have heard it, because she rubbed his jowls and said, "You're smart. You'll learn. Memorize what Leozack tells you and you'll be able to get along with others."

"How to pretend to be normal." Deathsaurus couldn't keep the scorn from his voice, though he was vaguely aware that he'd tried. It was important that he not hurt Lyzack, but it wasn't easy to soften his feelings.

"It will help you get what you want." Lyzack did not seem hurt. She surely knew him well enough to realize no malice had been intended. Her voice was gentle but firm. "No more starting bar fights by accident."

Deathsaurus sighed. He *did* have an unpleasant habit of turning fun outings with his two friends into violent brawls. "You're right. That ability will be very useful." Deathsaurus lashed his tail. "But why is it so difficult? Why does it come naturally to everyone else but me?" He narrowed his optics. "Leozack is right. I've got crossed wires. I'm not like the typical Decepticon."

*I'm not like you.*

Leozack must have been nearby and listening, because he came to join them then. Leozack sat down beside his sibling and put his hands on Deathsaurus's forehead and said, "You? You'll never be the typical *anything*."

Then he'd smiled, and kissed the horn on the end of Deathsaurus's beak, and Deathsaurus's spark had spun madly in its casing. Leozack and Lyzack liked him for who and what he was. The three of them had that *connection* that had so befuddled Deathsaurus in his early years of liberty. That *connection* made him feel good.

He would learn what Leozack taught him, and he would apply Lyzack's advice. *Don't think of what you'd like for yourself. Think of what the other person would like.*

Because they weren't the same, they were so often entirely different, because Deathsaurus wasn't really a person at all, but a beast that had learned to pretend.

#

*Treat Tarn the way he wants you to treat him. Not the way you'd want him to treat you if the situation was reversed.*

Deathsaurus had to keep Lyzack's words in mind. Right now, if the situation was reversed, Deathsaurus would be angrily snapping at Tarn to let him go. Deathsaurus would never let himself be held helpless in someone else's grip, not even if that person was his lover. His second greatest fear was that Tarn would someday try.

His greatest fear would always be for the welfare of his crew. His five hundred lights against the cold and dark.

He wanted to count Tarn among his lights as well.

But Deathsaurus and Tarn were very different people. Tarn clearly liked being pinned at Deathsaurus's mercy. He was moaning very loudly. After each sound, his optics brightened and his frame tensed, as though he were shocked by the noise he was making. As though he were embarrassed by it. Deathsaurus didn't think those responses were part of the act. His virtuoso was simply unable to maintain the effortless composure of his Tarn persona when Deathsaurus fluttered his calipers against the spike in his valve.

That spike was very, very hard—as appropriate to a mech who was ridiculously turned on.

On the subject of being ridiculously turned on...Deathsaurus got wet just thinking about making Tarn come undone.

Deathsaurus had no use for flattery. But for Tarn, he leaned forward and whispered, "You stand stud as though you were built for it. As though you were designed to grace my berth."

It was Tarn's berth, technically. But Deathsaurus considered occupation to be nine-tenths of possession. And Tarn wasn't arguing.

"I've a good mind to keep you like this forever," Deathsaurus murmured.

Tarn moaned very loudly indeed. He obviously appreciated Deathsaurus's silly words. It revved his engines hard.

So Deathsaurus did something that he definitely wouldn't want Tarn to do to him.

He flared his wings for balance, lifted his hands off Tarn's shoulders, and took Tarn's wrists, one in each hand. He drew Tarn's arms up over Tarn's head and crossed Tarn's wrists. Then he pinned them together in his left hand, holding them behind the pillow.

Deathsaurus admired Tarn's frame stretched out beneath him. "To keep this beautiful work of art pinned right here for my pleasure."

Tarn's optics exploded in ruby light. "My Lord," he begged. "My Lord, tell me what you need me to do to make that happen."

*Very different people indeed.* Tarn adored this game, and Deathsaurus found it increasingly easy to humour him.

"All you have to do," Deathsaurus said with a wicked grin, "is not overload too soon."

Tarn whimpered, but his spike grew hard as steel.

Mortilus preserve them both. Tarn evidently liked having a monster in his berth. And Deathsaurus had never really figured out how to be anything else.

# Maestro

## Chapter Notes

I'm so happy to hear from all the folks who like my interpretation of Deathsaurus. One of the biggest challenges in this series has been that most of the folks who come here already like Tarn, but Des has had a much smaller role in MTMTE, a lot less page time, and Victory is a niche taste. So it's been on me to make Deathsaurus interesting, likeable, sympathetic, but not so "nice" that he hasn't got his own issues or the stuff it takes to make a warlord. I'm glad that people love Des too!

### Chapter Twenty-one: Maestro

Tarn thrashed against Deathsaurus's grip.

Not too hard. He wouldn't want to actually get away.

He wanted to struggle just hard enough to properly appreciate the power in Deathsaurus's frame.

Tarn's head rested on a pillow, while his wrists were currently being held in Deathsaurus's hand up behind that pillow. Tarn knew what this pose had done to his pretty pets. It had emphasized their chests, and framed their delicate throats...and hammered home their helplessness.

Tarn had never expected the tables to be turned on him this way. It felt like a dream so taboo that he hadn't even dared consciously wish for it.

But now here he was—pinned underneath Deathsaurus, and the rogue warlord wasn't pounding his valve, though he'd used it earlier. Instead, Deathsaurus was riding Tarn's spike, and, from the expressions on his face, enjoying it thoroughly.

Tarn could barely manage enough leverage to thrust into Deathsaurus's ravenous valve, which gobbled up his spike with every downward motion of Deathsaurus's hips. Tarn was stripped of his ability to seduce his lover or even to control the pattern of their interaction.

Deathsaurus's valve devoured his spike and there was next to nothing he could do about it.

It was the most arousing thing Tarn had ever imagined.

He'd... By Mortilus, he'd have given *anything* for Megatron to do this to him. To admire him, to toy with him, to stretch him out and pin him down. To make a meal of him.

He'd knelt for Megatron, yes, but Megatron had never looked at him the way Deathsaurus did, with such intense focus and such feral desire. Megatron had never wanted Tarn to himself for an entire night...

How often had Tarn told his lonely spark that Megatron was a busy mech and he should be grateful for the attention Megatron chose to give him? It was up to Tarn to cherish those few precious moments he'd had with his Lord in the long hours when Megatron had something else to do.

*Like Starscream* . The bitter thought turned Tarn's mouth sour.

*Would Deathsaurus...*

Tarn didn't dare pursue that line of thought. There was nothing he could do about Deathsaurus's other lovers. There was nothing he could do about much of anything right now, and he wouldn't want it any other way.

Tarn dimmed his optics instead. *Use me for your pleasure and...be kind to me, my czar in onyx.*

"Ah...ah..." he moaned.

Deathsaurus purred, riding Tarn's spike in slow, undulating movements. "Do you want something?" he inquired, as though he could ride Tarn like this all night.

Primus help him, maybe he could.

"I want to overload," Tarn panted.

"I'm not done," Deathsaurus said sharply.

"I know." Tarn bit his lip under the mask. "I'll be good. But your valve...it feels so wonderful...I..."

Should he say it?

*Deathsaurus thinks spikes are for submissives to use.*

"I love having my spike inside it."

Deathsaurus smiled. "Your spike fits inside it so well." His grin broadened. "Like you were designed for the task."

The comment smacked of Functionism. Tarn should be disgusted. Instead it thrilled him.

He'd never admit to Deathsaurus that he'd had his spike modified to resemble Megatron's.

And he'd never—never—let Megatron anywhere near his czar in onyx. Not to frag him, not to harm him. Not for anything.

A memory file opened in Tarn's head, as though his own brain were desperately trying to remind him that the whole reason he was here on the Warworld was to gather up cannon fodder to throw at Megatron. Because Tarn could never best Megatron in a fair fight. Not even his own DJD would be enough. No, he needed Megatron to fight his way through a few hundred Decepticons and Deathsaurus too, and then *maybe* Tarn might have a chance.

*No. Megatron can't have my Deathsaurus.*

*Or what will I have when Megatron's dead?*

Without Megatron...

Tarn would be all right without Megatron as long as he had his new ally at his side. And in his berth. Right?

Tarn realized he'd never imagined a life after defeating Megatron. It was as though that final battle was a bend in the road that he could not see beyond.

*It's as though you don't intend to survive that fight.*

Tarn wasn't the only one in this berth who had such dark and self-destructive thoughts. Tarn had read Deathsaurus's old battle plan against the DJD. He'd been horrified to realize that Deathsaurus had been ready to die to protect his crew.

*Are you any different?*

Tarn felt a surge of energy stir his spark. In this moment, he *wanted* to survive. He wanted another life, another Lord, another chance at a future. A future different from the one that Megatron had...no, not promised. *Suggested*. Hinted at. Dangled in front of him until Tarn—Damus—pledged his soul to Megatron for a chance to make a dream come true.

Deathsaurus was not one for pretty promises. For the first time Tarn appreciated that fact. If Deathsaurus said he would pillage the stars to build Tarn an empire...he *would*. The battle plans would be drawn up before the words were ever spoken.

All Tarn had to do was convince Deathsaurus he was worthy.

Tarn bit his lip and vowed not to overload. He would lie here like a good stud and watch to be sure he was pleasing his Lord.

Deathsaurus flared his wings and dimmed his optics, clearly savouring the feeling of Tarn's spike sliding in and out of his valve. He rolled his hips, as if searching for just the right spot. Tarn knew when Deathsaurus found it—he bared his teeth and groaned loudly, unselfconsciously, not caring who heard.

Tarn whimpered.

Deathsaurus was majestic in pleasure. He rode Tarn harder, faster, chasing his ecstasy, and it took every last ounce of Tarn's willpower not to climax himself at the sight. Tarn clenched his hands until his fingertips bit deep into his palms, struggling to keep control when Deathsaurus roared the glory of his overload. Pleasure and pain came together into something sublime, and Tarn felt as though he'd transcended himself, as though he'd been transformed utterly. Turned into something worthy of his czar in onyx.

Then Tarn's willpower faltered.

There was nothing Tarn could do to stop his overload once he'd started. He uploaded—Primus, he didn't know what, but it didn't matter. There was no connection with Deathsaurus's jack thanks to the piercing in his spike. There was nowhere for that data to go. The files went into a holding pattern that he would erase later. Still, he felt energy discharge into Deathsaurus's waiting valve, and it felt good, so good, and he shouldn't, it was too soon, Deathsaurus wasn't done. But he couldn't stop himself from surrendering to Deathsaurus's masterful touch.

Deathsaurus released Tarn's wrists. He planted his forearms on either side of Tarn's body and bent his elbows, crouching like an animal, his chest pressed to Tarn's. His optics glowed as he watched Tarn's shudders cease.

Tarn lay there in his berth, gasping for breath, panting weakly, mumbling apologies. He didn't have the strength to move his arms from above his head. He dimmed his optics, unable to face Deathsaurus's disapproval. "I'm sorry," he choked out.

He was a failure. A washout. A waste of Deathsaurus's time.

"I tried. I'm sorry."



Primus, why hadn't he stocked his bedside table with those little pills that kept a mech's spike hard? Why hadn't he been prepared? Why had he thought he could please Deathsaurus on his own without chemical assistance?

Deathsaurus would not care that he had tried. Megatron and Shockwave and Pianoforte...they had only cared about Damus of Tarn's *success*. Damus knew not to bother his lords with pathetic attempts. He practiced and rehearsed, he mastered his skills, and *then* he showed his masters what he could do, once he'd honed himself to perfection, once his mastery was complete.

Damus had wanted nothing more than to do as Deathsaurus bade him and he had *glitched*.

He turned his face away and waited. He lowered his arms, feeling the ache in his shoulders from having his hands above his head so long. He wondered if Deathsaurus would slap him. Maybe Deathsaurus would grab his wrists again and pin his frame and force him to listen while Deathsaurus told him just how *badly* he had failed. How *disappointed* he was in him. Damus would prefer the slap. Physical injuries healed in time but spark-scars lingered for...

*Millions of years?*

How could he possibly know what it would be like to have lived for millions of...

Tarn came back to himself in a sudden rush of memories. He had his Voice now. He would not let Deathsaurus shame him. Not even if he deserved it. He was the leader of the Decepticon Justice Division; he demanded respect. Respect and fear. His optics brightened.

Deathsaurus bunted his nose against Tarn's mask, forcing Tarn to look at him. "Are you all right?"

The expression on Deathsaurus's face was not disgust, or anger, or worst of all, the cold and distant boredom that suggested a singer was not worthy of a critique or a reaction or of any acknowledgement of his existence whatsoever.

It was concern.

"Tarn?" Deathsaurus's brow furrowed. "Talk to me."

Tarn drew in a ragged breath, and let it out slowly.

"Please," Deathsaurus said, and there was a note of true distress in his voice. "I went too far, didn't I?"

# Impromptu

## Chapter Twenty-two: Impromptu

Deathsaurus cursed himself. His fuel pump hammered madly in his chest. He'd made a mistake and he'd better get ready for the consequences.

*Regret* was beyond his capabilities. Tarn had told him to *take his pleasure* and he *had*. It wasn't his fault if Tarn had second thoughts after the fact.

He doubted if Tarn would care that he'd asked for this.

*You should have known better*, said the voice in his head. *You should have known better than to take Tarn at his word. You know people rarely say what they truly mean.*

But how in the Inferno was Deathsaurus to know otherwise if no one would bloody well *tell* him?

No, it was Tarn's own fault for asking for something he couldn't handle.

Which didn't stop Deathsaurus from feeling agitated and bitter now. "Tarn," he urged. "Please say something."

"I'm sorry," Tarn said with a gasp.

Deathsaurus blinked. "Sorry? Why?"

Tarn turned his head away. "You told me not to overload too soon."

That was true. Deathsaurus had climaxed only once before Tarn had overloaded as well. But...

Deathsaurus cocked his head, unable to stop himself from making the *curious predator* gesture. "You know I wasn't very nice." He bunted Tarn's mask affectionately. "You know I made it hard for you, right?"

"I'm sorry," Tarn repeated.

Realization hit Deathsaurus like a punch in the gut. "Do you think I'm *angry*?"

"Shouldn't you be?" Tarn said bleakly.

"This is a *game*," Deathsaurus said incredulously. "Wasn't that what you said?" It didn't matter if Deathsaurus's "role" had simply involved letting his true self run wild. This whole encounter was supposed to be make-believe, and therefore, their words and actions didn't really count. "Isn't that the point—that play isn't to be taken seriously?"

Tarn moved his head. His optics looked up at Deathsaurus through the eye holes in his mask. "A virtuoso would be shamed to disappoint his patron."

*Oh. So Tarn's still playing.*

Funny. Tarn's distress had smelled very real. Perhaps that was the risk of taking an actor to berth.

"A patron would be very unreasonable," Deathsaurus replied, "to fault his virtuoso for succumbing to his traps."

Tarn touched Deathsaurus's cheek. "Weren't your traps designed to test me?"

Deathsaurus smirked; then he caught himself and pulled the other side of his mouth up into a genuine smile. "No. They were designed for us both to have fun when you fell into them." He pressed a kiss to Tarn's mask, and dared to sweep his tongue over Tarn's lips. The edges of the mask cut his tongue. He didn't care, not even when he withdrew his tongue and tasted raw energon from the cuts.

Did Tarn really think Deathsaurus would be vindictive? Deathsaurus tilted his head as his brain expanded on that thought. "Why...do you *want* me to punish you? Is that part of the game?"

Deathsaurus didn't know what to make of this possibility. He'd heard about mechs with kinks like that, but he didn't care for the idea. He couldn't understand how some mechs could consider punishment, or humiliation, or degradation, to be fun. He would despise anyone who put *him* on the receiving end of such treatment. And he would not derive any enjoyment from hurting someone he liked. Could he really make himself play along if Tarn wished to be disciplined?

"No," Tarn said. His whole frame trembled. "No, I don't want that."

Deathsaurus felt relieved, but he asked, "Are you certain? You don't enjoy those punishment games I've heard about?"

"I enjoy serving my Lord," Tarn said, in a tone raw with honesty, "and pleasing him."

Deathsaurus relaxed. "Good. That's something we both can enjoy." He licked Tarn's throat, wishing he could lick his cheek instead.

Tarn wrung his hands. "But you only overloaded the once."

"Is *that* what has you agitated?" Deathsaurus stretched his wings. "But it's so easily fixed."

"My Lord?" Tarn inquired.

Deathsaurus blinked. Surely Tarn had to be playing. The answer was so obvious. "There's more than one way to make me overload."

Deathsaurus could smell Tarn's anxiety. "The mask...the mask doesn't come off," Tarn panted.

Deathsaurus was certain that if he pressed the issue, he could make Tarn remove the mask, but he hesitated. Even if it was in character for "the patron" to make such a demand and "the virtuoso" to obey, he knew the real Tarn wouldn't like it.

No matter how much Deathsaurus wanted it, he would not cross the line. *Evil* was a word for things someone *did*, not what someone *was*. Deathsaurus did not have to do monstrous things simply because he had been built a monster.

Defiance was in his very spark. Even if he had to defy his own destiny.

Besides, Deathsaurus had something else in mind. He pulled his lips into a grin. "How about your hand?"

"My..."

Deathsaurus couldn't help laughing. He saw the exact moment when Tarn got it. The other Decepticon's optics formed huge circles under his mask.

"Come on." Deathsaurus flopped onto his side and pressed his back against Tarn's body. "Give me

more.”

His virtuoso obeyed. A bit awkwardly, at first. Tarn was shy, and it was rather charming: shyness from a mech with such an authoritative and brutal reputation.

Tarn rested his hand on Deathsaurus’s hip as if gathering the nerve to move it the rest of the way. Deathsaurus heard Tarn draw a deep breath into his vents. Then Tarn slid his hand over Deathsaurus’s abdomen, headed for his open valve panel. “I don’t know what you like,” Tarn stammered.

“Why don’t you show me what you do to yourself?” Deathsaurus whispered. Truly, the idea was exciting. Tarn self-servicing...what a lovely thought.

If Tarn ever offered to play this game again, Deathsaurus would ask Tarn to frag his own fingers, so that he could watch. Right now, though, Deathsaurus was too revved up himself to make a good audience. He hungered for Tarn’s touch.

Tarn curled into Deathsaurus’s back. Deathsaurus heard Tarn grunt, and he furled his wings, trying to make it easy for Tarn to snuggle up to him in this position. There wasn’t much he could do about the fact that his back was covered in spines and wedged protrusions, but he could fold them flat against his back to make it a little more comfortable for Tarn.

Tarn settled his chest against Deathsaurus’s back. His index and third finger came to rest on Deathsaurus’s anterior node.

Deathsaurus inhaled sharply with anticipation.

“My Lord,” Tarn murmured, “do you want me to rub you here, or do you want me inside?”

“Inside,” Deathsaurus growled. Tarn was right about one thing. Deathsaurus’s hungry valve was in no way satiated by Tarn’s previous performance. It ached to be filled, stretched, satisfied.

Deathsaurus was startled by how quickly Tarn’s fingers spread the lips of his valve. A single finger—Deathsaurus thought it was Tarn’s third—pressed gently. Deathsaurus’s calipers tightened on it and began to squeeze rhythmically, trying to drag the finger deeper. Deathsaurus heard Tarn’s gasp of surprise.

“You have...no shame,” Tarn panted. If he was trying to scold Deathsaurus, he was doing a poor job of it. The tone of his voice sounded impressed.

“Should I get some?” Deathsaurus teased. He could hear the truth in his own tone. He wanted Tarn, and he had no qualms about being honest about it.

“Later,” Tarn murmured, and added another finger, which quickly sank into position beside the first.

Deathsaurus groaned his approval. “Hasn’t anyone told you how good you are at this?”

“I told you.” Tarn’s whisper tickled Deathsaurus’s spark. “I only had the one previous attempt at a private recital.”

Deathsaurus couldn’t believe that Tarn was an innocent. He was entirely too good at finding the nodes tucked in Deathsaurus’s valve and setting them ablaze, one by one. Deathsaurus supposed that Tarn’s usual lovers were in no position to judge his performance. Tarn usually played the role of *judge*—along with *jury* and *executioner*. Maybe that was why this game appealed to him. It gave him the opportunity to be someone else.

*Or maybe he's good at this because you asked him to do to you what he does to himself.*

*And if the "Patron" is just your usual self, freed of your respect for...and fear of...the DJD, then what if the "Virtuoso" is...*

Tarn spread his fingers in a scissor motion, and Deathsaurus's thoughts were blotted out under a warm tide of rising arousal. "Yeah...like that..." he groaned.

"You can take a third." It wasn't a question—it was more like an observation—but Deathsaurus wasn't taking any chances.

"Yes," he panted.

Tarn eased a third finger into Deathsaurus's valve. Three fingers together made for a nice stretch, just wide enough for Deathsaurus to have to work to take it. Tarn pressed gently but insistently into Deathsaurus's valve. Then he withdrew, waited a breath, and slid in again. Deathsaurus moved his hips in counterpoint, driving the fingers past the second and third rings of calipers and pushing them deeper into his valve. Tarn's fingertips pressed deliciously on a deeply buried interior node, and Deathsaurus moaned his appreciation.

"Like this, sir?"

"What a fine stud." Deathsaurus let his engine purr loudly with appreciation. "By Fortune, this feels good."

"I live to serve." Deathsaurus had heard the phrase uttered with sarcasm many times before, but this was the first time he'd ever heard anyone use it with complete sincerity.

*I live to...*

Deathsaurus was glad he was facing away from Tarn. That Tarn didn't see the expression on his face when he made the connection.

What had Tarn done for the last two million years but *serve Megatron*? The Decepticon Justice Division: Megatron's personal hit squad.

Deathsaurus shivered. This submissive persona—maybe this had been the real "virtuoso" that Tarn had been, long ago, in Old Vos. If it had been—how much, really, would he have changed?

*"Tarn" is the personification of Decepticon authority. Megatron's will made flesh.*

*And this mech in my berth was...is...an actor.*

*Perhaps a very good one.*

*Perhaps so good that I've been mistaking the truth and the fiction all along.*

Deathsaurus felt his spine prick with warning. If he'd stumbled onto a truth that Tarn had been hiding, he could be in a very dangerous position if he tipped his hand. And he had never found it easy to keep secrets.

Tarn tickled a set of calipers deep in his valve and made Deathsaurus cry out with pleasure.

"My virtuoso," Deathsaurus panted, hoping to keep Tarn focused on their current activities while he tried to make sense of his new suspicions. "You have such skills to please a mech..."

“Would you like to see another, my lord?” Tarn offered. His voice was a smouldering purr in Deathsaurus’s audio. How could a mech sound so docile and submissive, and yet so dangerously enticing, at the same time?

Deathsaurus’s senses swam at the idea of some new decadent indulgence. Tarn’s talons massaging his nodes made it very hard for him to concentrate. He wanted to turn off his noisy thoughts and just *fuck*. Like the animal he was. It took all his self-control to summon the presence of mind to ask, “What do you have in mind?”

“My lord, if you would lie on your back and relax, I...would be able to stand stud for you again.”

*Lie back and let me service you.* Deathsaurus’s mouth watered.

Could he possibly be right? Could his virtuoso, so eager to serve, so thirsty for praise—could this be the real Tarn?

*Can you hold yourself back from taking advantage if it is?*

Deathsaurus didn’t know. He wasn’t inclined to trust himself that far. But he also wasn’t inclined to stop the game.

Deathsaurus didn’t know where his self-discipline had gone. He’d have to find it later. But he wasn’t about to go looking for it *now*.

Virtue or vice, Deathsaurus owned his choices and accepted the consequences.

“You’ll have to take your fingers out of my valve,” Deathsaurus teased, “before I can roll over.”

“Sir, you...you haven’t told me to.”

“It’s difficult,” Deathsaurus purred. “They feel so good.”

“I promise you, my spike will feel better.”

“*Will* it now.” Deathsaurus didn’t remember ever wanting interface more than he did at this moment. “Then take out your fingers and show me.”

# Baroque

## Chapter Notes

I'm in the middle of a cross-country move, so I won't have my computer for a while...the next update might be delayed. This is also why I've been updating just this one fic for the last several weeks - I outlined it and did the bulk of the writing last year, so all I've had to do is edit and post, given that I haven't had time to write anything new during the packing. My other fics will start updating again once I'm settled on the other end (as will this one!)

### Chapter Twenty-three: Baroque

It wasn't as though Tarn hadn't ever seen a mech on his back, spreading his legs for him before. That wasn't the part that had Tarn so shaken.

It was the *look* on Deathsaurus's face. His parted thighs weren't an offering, nor were they a sacrifice. They were a challenge. *Make good on your promises.*

Deathsaurus wasn't lying down in surrender, either. He stretched out his wings and his arms, making himself as big and wide as possible, before he let his frame relax. He sprawled with no apology, taking up the entire berth. His optics dimmed in the expression of a mech who'd put in a hard day's work and was now ready to savour a well-deserved reward.

Tarn's spike was to be that reward.

Tarn knelt between Deathsaurus's legs and whimpered with want as Deathsaurus showed off his valve. There was no reason for Tarn to keep silent. Tarn knew his czar enjoyed a mech who was happy to serve.

"Come, my pretty virtuoso," Deathsaurus purred, crooking his fingers in obvious invitation. He patted his chest. "Come up here and show me what you have for me."

Tarn obeyed. Oh, how he loved to obey.

"You never call me pretty," he whispered as he took position overtop his Lord.

Tarn had always assumed that Deathsaurus had no interest in appearances. Deathsaurus certainly seemed careless of his own. He sauntered around the Warworld, all feathers and claws and teeth and spines, as though daring anyone to comment on his bestial looks. He'd even added a few more feathers and spines since the DJD had arrived on the Warworld. At first Tarn had thought that Deathsaurus didn't know about the common fashion on Cybertron. After the feather upgrade, he suspected that Deathsaurus knew and didn't care.

Could Deathsaurus ever understand how badly Tarn wanted to be found attractive? Particularly by the warlord in his berth?

Deathsaurus chuckled as he raised his hand to Tarn's masked cheek. "It seems a strange compliment," Deathsaurus murmured, "for a race who change shape as often as we do, to be so caught up in transitory appearances." His talons gently traced the side of Tarn's helm. "You do

realize that if necessity placed you in an entirely different body frame, that I would still find you just as desirable?”

Tarn felt his spark clench in his chest. It was as though the entire universe had come to a dead stop.

*You’d love me in any body?*

Deathsaurus had never said the word *love*, Tarn told himself. His universe shuddered and sluggishly resumed its motion.

But still.

“I like *you*,” Deathsaurus purred. “Not just your frame.”

Tarn felt time collapse. No past, no future. Nothing but him and Deathsaurus, together in a perfect moment.

“You do know that, right?” Deathsaurus persisted. “The medics could sleeve you in a laser pointer and I’d still want you?”

Tarn swallowed. His infamous Voice threatened to fail him. “I...I know it now,” he stammered, but his mind still asked the question he did not dare speak.

*If they took these hands I touch you with...if they took my face...would you still look at me this way?*

“Then never doubt,” Deathsaurus said, “the beauty of your warm and perfect spark.”

Tarn swore he felt his spark blooming with warmth and light. His head spun. His frame trembled. What was the word for this feeling that Deathsaurus inspired in him? *Love* was something he’d always been forced to struggle to earn. This was a *gift*.

“My Lord,” Tarn whispered.

A gift he didn’t deserve. Tarn had never thought of people as souls rather than bodies. The Vosians had valued delicacy and grace; the early Decepticons had lifted up the Tarnian industrial classes. Both parts of Tarn’s upbringing dismissed Deathsaurus as a creature. Still. Tarn shut his optics and tried to imagine what Deathsaurus would be, divorced from the bestial frame that whoever had built him had put him in.

*Defiant.*

*Sovereign.*

*Warlord.*

*Partner.*

Tarn felt his spark flickering wildly. He didn’t understand what was happening to him. He thought he’d wanted Megatron. He thought he’d craved Megatron’s favour. He’d made himself into Tarn to please Megatron.

He wanted Deathsarus in an entirely different way.

He became someone else when he was alone with Deathsaurus. Not the way he’d consciously striven to become Tarn for his Lord Megatron—to be the punishing left hand that Megatron had needed. He changed in a way that felt as inexorable as gravity, as inevitable as time. He changed



whether he wanted to or not.

Megatron had taken him apart and rebuilt him into a weapon. Deathsaurus tore that construct down. Stared into the shadows. Called Damus of Tarn to come forth and face him.

And liked what he saw.

Damus could hear Deathsaurus's unspoken words. *I need you to be who you are. I need you to be bold enough to be yourself without apology. When we face one another in truth, perhaps the two of us will change shape into something more. Something more than the sum of our parts.*

Damus felt fear grip his spark. *I don't have to sacrifice myself, to be what Deathsaurus wants.*

*I just have to be myself.*

It was much harder. Much more terrifying.

But he'd do anything for Deathsaurus.

A sob escaped Damus's lips. He was so frightened. His Czar in Onyx was so demanding. But he wouldn't back away. There was no force in the universe strong enough to make him back away. He would be as brave as Deathsaurus deserved.

"Tarn?" Deathsaurus asked. His optics flared with alarm, and Damus guessed why. What had Deathsaurus said earlier? *I went too far?*

"You've gone as far as I need you to," Damus whispered. "That's not too far."

Deathsaurus looked puzzled. "Tar..."

Damus cut him off. Pressed his mask to Deathsaurus's lips and slid his tongue out through the opening.

Deathsaurus kissed him back. Enthusiastically. Welcoming him.

Damus slid his spike into his czar's valve.

The kiss ended with Deathsaurus groaning in pleasure against Damus's mask. Damus dimmed his optics. It made him happy to make his Lord happy. Deathsaurus's valve took him easily. He was precisely where he belonged.

He thrust in and out of Deathsaurus's valve, and then back in again. Deathsaurus's hips moved to welcome his thrusts. "Like *that*," Deathsaurus murmured, and Damus was delighted to comply, because it felt good to him too. They moved together, two frames united in one.

*I please him.*

*He likes me.*

*I'm enough.*

"Des," he mewled. He spoke the name over and over, like a mantra. "Des. Des."

"Yes." Deathsaurus's breath came hard and fast. "My vir...tu...o..."

"It's Damus." The words were out of his mouth before he could think better of them.

Deathsaurus's whole body trembled with pent-up arousal. His fans blasted hot air. His fuel pump thundered so powerfully that Damus could feel it through Deathsaurus's armour.

But Deathsaurus had the presence of mind to focus all four optics on Damus and favour him with a warm and even-sided smile. "Damus," Deathsaurus said reverently. He looked up at Damus, and his smile broadened. His optics shone, as though he'd glimpsed heaven itself. Deathsaurus threw back his head and let his climax overtake him.

Damus was left wondering what Deathsaurus knew that he didn't—what key unlocked that kind of perfect happiness.

The old classical texts had spoken of ascension, and nirvana, and morality locks, and perfect bliss in the Well of All Sparks, where All Were One. Damus had studied the hymns and the poetry, the epics and the psalms. He thought he had grasped the concept.

He had not.

Not until this moment, when Deathsaurus looked at him and said his name and smiled and overloaded into ecstasy. Not until his very own epiphany shattered his world to the core.

*The key is you.*

*He's this happy because of you.*

Tarn overloaded too, but he barely noticed as his body spasmed and his vision faded to grey, then black. That warmth in his spark overwhelmed all other sensations.

# Reprise

## Chapter Notes

I have internet in my new house and...

GUESS WHO'S EXCITED FOR TFCON THIS WEEKEND

### Chapter Twenty-Four: Reprise

Deathsaurus knew full well that “Tarn” couldn’t possibly be the DJD leader’s original name.

Deathcobra was a proponent of the theory that the DJD had been *built to purpose*. That they were all MTOs—a bespoke death squad. Deathsaurus wasn’t certain.

It wasn’t entirely implausible that a person could be named after a city. MTOs were built in batches; many of them had been named in batches as well. Killbison had recalled some of his batch brothers’ names: Ironhorse, Ironstag, Ironrhino. There’d been a second batch created for the Fifth Tagan Advance: Steelbison, Steelhorse, Steelstag, Steelrhino.

Then there was Jallguar. Jall. What kind of name was Jall? Just a series of designation codes slurred into a name. JA-11.

Deathsaurus would absolutely believe that an overworked line supervisor could name a batch of MTOs after cities. But what were the odds that every mech in that batch would end up in the Decepticon Justice Division? Was it even possible that some Decepticon mnemosurgeon had figured out how to code for sociopathy? The more he observed the DJD, the less he believed Deathcobra’s theory. Deathsaurus thought it more likely that Tarn had hand-picked his team for two particular traits: cruelty and obedience.

His observations suggested to him that most of the DJD were sociopaths of a particular type. The kind of mechs who would be behind bars in any decent society, yes, but also the kind who could behave themselves and follow orders in exchange for an acceptable venue in which to indulge their particular vices. They were *wired wrong*. Perhaps not in the same way that Deathsaurus was *wired wrong*, but they, like Deathsaurus, were not an easy fit in the general populace.

Deathsaurus knew where to dig for more information. The prisons. The disciplinary units. Who were the well-behaved monsters? What had happened to them?

Deathsaurus had made a few preliminary inquiries. He even had a lead. Forestock. A Decepticon physiotherapist, recently gone missing. Deathsaurus wasn’t entirely certain—it was hard for the Warworld to get reliable access to current data—but he was strongly suspicious he knew Vos’s real name. None of his snooping, though, would get him anywhere closer to the two members of the DJD who probably weren’t sociopaths.

Deathsaurus took Nickel at her word: as the survivor of a destroyed Cybertronian colony, her name would not be in Cybertron’s records. But it wasn’t Nickel he was curious about. It was *Tarn*.

Tarn had brought Deathsaurus and all his crew to their knees with his voice on their hacked inter-Decepticon frequency. Deathsaurus had felt Tarn’s deadly talent like a vise closing on his spark. It

had taken all his self-control not to lose himself in a rising tide of hatred and rage. In that moment he was certain that he would die, or that Tarn would clap him in chains. Personally, he would have preferred death.

But for his crew's sake, Deathsaurus could not afford to give up. He had to keep his head and keep fighting and lay seeds for future resistance. He could not value his pride more than his people. He had to survive and take care of his crew.

Even with his life in Tarn's grip he'd found the wherewithal to ask a question. He'd inquired how Tarn had managed to use his Voice even after Deathsaurus had muted his audios.

Tarn had backed off with the pain and torment right away. He'd mildly explained how he'd hacked the communications, and then he'd lead into an almost pleasant conversation about history and the Decepticon cause. While Tarn had talked, Deathsaurus had analyzed, and what Deathsaurus discovered had stunned him.

Tarn had not drawn any pleasure out of having Deathsaurus at his mercy.

Deathsaurus knew that had the situations been reversed, he'd have been trembling with adrenaline, his fuel pump thundering in his chest, his instincts roaring with the thrill of a kill at the end of a hunt. His jaws would have dripped in anticipation of tasting his prey's energon. He was wired a predator, and he had a predator's desires.

Deathsaurus had not heard Tarn's pulse speed up when he had the Warworld's crew at his mercy. Tarn had smelled anxious, not excited. Tarn did not want either the satisfaction of a successful kill or the power rush that hit right before the coup de grace. What Tarn really wanted...

Deathsaurus had realized that he ought to pay attention to Tarn's historical rambling. Perhaps the DJD commander would get around to telling Deathsaurus what he really wanted. But in that moment Deathsaurus had been certain that, much to his surprise, Tarn did not want him dead.

Now—lying in Tarn's berth with the DJD commander's frame draped over top of his, after some very enthusiastic fragging—now, Deathsaurus had the grace to feel a little embarrassed about his initial encounter with Tarn. The second Tarn had switched off the network, Deathsaurus had asked him to kill his team as a condition of their alliance.

It was, of course, a trap. The Warworld crew would have time to rally while Tarn executed his team. In a best case scenario, the DJD would fight their deaths. They might damage Tarn, and they might even buy Lyzack enough time to enact countermeasures against the radio hack. *Then...*

Tarn, injured and alone, stripped of his greatest advantage.

Against five hundred Warworld soldiers.

And Deathsaurus. Deathsaurus *first*.

Deathsaurus had felt the adrenaloids dumping into his system. He'd been the one fired up and ready to take Tarn's life. He'd been the one hungry to kill. Those predator's desires craved Tarn dead at his feet. He remembered holding his breath in anticipation. Waiting for Tarn's response that would set the whole plan into motion.

"No," Tarn had said. "The answer's no."

*No.* Deathsaurus felt his mind reeling with shock. He hadn't planned for this outcome.

He'd been denied his kill.

Of course he'd rallied quickly. His crew were counting on him. Alliance? Of course! Tarn had clapped him on the shoulder and Deathsaurus had felt his fuel tank sink as he realized what was surely expected of him.

Well. For his crew, he would seal the alliance the old-fashioned way.

Looking back, Deathsaurus supposed he shouldn't be too bitter about how it had all turned out. He'd enjoyed sealing the alliance a lot more than he'd expected he would. Fragging off all that unused adrenaline had felt very good. Particularly as Tarn hadn't made the experience a demeaning one.

Deathsaurus had enjoyed it enough to flirt with Tarn, waiting to see where Tarn would draw the line. Tarn had drawn it in a small, unused office where his attempt to scold Deathsaurus had collapsed into another fragging session. Tarn had summoned enough dignity to inform Deathsaurus that next time, he expected a discreet invitation. And a room with a proper berth.

Fair enough. Deathsaurus wanted to continue their affair. It would be a good tactical move if he could make Tarn dependent on him. Affection or addiction, the result would be the same. Besides, Deathsaurus could not deny that he was having fun.

Deathsaurus had done as Tarn asked. He had prepared his finest guestroom and sent Tarn a personal communication that was clear and to the point.

Apparently *want to fuck?* did not meet Tarn's standards for an invitation either, but that hadn't stopped Tarn from showing up. Or from taking part.

Deathsaurus suspected that was the point where he'd started losing control.

That was the night they'd broken the berth and, when Tarn had complained about lingering on a broken slab, Deathsaurus had invited him to his private hab suite. The offer had slipped out instinctively, impulsively, before Deathsaurus could think better of it. Much to his surprise, Tarn had accepted it.

Deathsaurus wondered now if Tarn had been aware of the line he was crossing. Was it possible that Tarn had no idea what such an offer signified?

Deathsaurus clenched his jaw, realizing that he was in a world of trouble. He was getting *attached*. He had to remember that Tarn and his DJD were still dangerous. If the alliance fell apart, Deathsaurus had to be ready to protect his crew.

What if his attachment was one-sided? He was the one chasing Tarn. He was the one asking to cuddle after interface. He was the one mooning about, filling his head with implausible fantasies. There was no evidence whatsoever that Tarn saw their affair as anything other than a bit of casual fun.

Until now.

Tarn had not only initiated a very implausible fantasy, he'd also offered up his original name. If he was smart, Deathsaurus would start running searches on *Damus of Tarn* the instant Tarn was asleep. Perhaps there was some information in Tarn's past that Deathsaurus could use as leverage in the future should their alliance fall apart.

So why did Deathsaurus feel so guilty at the thought?

*He's not one of yours. He doesn't need your protection. He's dangerous, for Fortune's sake.*

But Deathsaurus found himself experiencing feelings of affection and protectiveness nonetheless.

*"It's Damus."* Deathsaurus replayed the memory. Heard the tremor in Tarn's vaunted Voice.

Deathsaurus understood. The name was a gift. An offering of trust. Weaponizing it would be a violation of that trust.

*"My Lord."* Tarn had said it over and over again.

Deathsaurus felt his hide twitch. He wasn't really Tarn's Lord. That was just part of the game.

Was *Damus of Tarn* also part of the game? Deathsaurus wanted it to be real, but what he wanted and the truth were often not the same. He needed to be ready if *Damus* was just a name for the virtuoso character—just another role that Tarn could play.

Deathsaurus shivered, suddenly afraid. He already knew Tarn was a smooth talker. *Damus of Tarn* might be one more mask.

*You went to an actor's berth. Maybe he lied to you. What did you think would happen?*

Deathsaurus felt his fuel tanks clench and his throat go tight. He was surprised by how much he had enjoyed the game. The interfacing had been better than ever, but he was beginning to suspect that he'd made a mistake.

Deathsaurus didn't typically play games, and no wonder. He had no idea how to separate fiction from reality now that the game was over.

# Stretto

## Chapter Notes

Hello to everyone I saw at TFCon this year! I feel as though I never have enough time to hang out with everyone as much as I would like. It was great to meet new friends and reconnect with old ones while celebrating something we all love. Cheers!

### Chapter Twenty-Five: Stretto

Tarn felt ecstasy slipping away from him. Much as he wished he could overload into Deathsaurus forever, the fact remained that even his powerful frame had its limits. The things Deathsaurus had done to him...he was well and truly spent.

He sprawled across Deathsaurus's chest, his intakes sucking in cool air, his fans aching from hard use. He didn't think he'd be able to use his spike again for hours.

Next time...could he sneak some nuke, without Deathsaurus finding out? Could Deathsaurus's appetites withstand Tarn's systems boosted on nuke? The very idea made Tarn's head spin.

He wanted to bask in the afterglow and savour those thoughts. They would be far more pleasant than stewing in bitter recrimination for having been so open and vulnerable with a warlord in his berth.

How could he possibly have spoken his old name out loud?

It was hard to follow any train of thought with Deathsaurus staring up at him.

"Are you all right?" the warlord asked softly.

There went Tarn's fantasies. No patron would ever bother with such a display of concern. Didn't Deathsaurus understand that Tarn was supposed to be keeping Deathsaurus happy, no matter what?

"I see the game is over," Tarn muttered.

Deathsaurus's optics flickered. He squeezed Tarn's shoulders, and Tarn didn't know if Deathsaurus was reassuring him, or himself.

"Yes," Tarn murmured as he slid off Deathsaurus's chest, "I'm fine." He knew that if he didn't respond, Deathsaurus would just keep asking, and get agitated on top of it. At least this way perhaps Tarn could slip back into his imagination before the afterglow faded. To that end, he rolled onto his side, away from Deathsaurus, and dimmed his optics.

Deathsaurus uttered a sleepy sound and shifted his weight behind Tarn. Tarn held his breath, hoping for a few words of praise. An expression of gratitude for the pleasure he'd provided. Instead, Deathsaurus snuggled into Tarn's back, slid his upper arm over Tarn's chest, and licked the nape of Tarn's neck.

Right. Deathsaurus had this strange fixation with *cuddling*.

Come to think of it, Deathsaurus had done this before. They'd broken the berth in Deathsaurus's

fancy suite, and then Deathsaurus had invited Tarn back to his cluttered hab near the bridge for a night of...of snuggling. It was bizarre. Deathsaurus was bizarre.

Frankly, Tarn didn't see why Deathsaurus didn't just *live* in his elegant room. It made about as much sense as Deathsaurus's habit of lingering around in bed even after he'd gotten what he'd wanted—namely, *none*.

It would be so easy to label Deathsaurus *a little bit mad*. That's what his file had said. But Tarn knew full well that conclusion was wrong. Deathsaurus was perfectly sane and he wasn't as flippant or irrational as the DJD had thought.

*He's got his reasons. You just haven't figured them out.*

So, despite having had exactly the kind of interface he'd asked for, Deathsaurus was probably going to hang around in Tarn's berth, cuddling and licking. He must get *something* from it. Tarn could provide that something, and serve his Lord and get his own satisfaction. He just wished he knew what that *something* was. It would make it easier for him to do a good job. To earn his lover's praise.

Deathsaurus sniffed at Tarn's neck, then bunted him with his nose and snuffled around Tarn's tank tracks. Tarn could feel the warlord's breath hot on his helm. A slow, steady purr emanated from the warlord's chest. Deathsaurus inhaled deeply while his tongue flicked over Tarn's spinal strut.

Tarn sighed. *Why* did Deathsaurus persist in doing this?

Tarn reminded himself that it was bad manners for a performer to question his patron's pleasure. Several of the Vosian Opera's patrons had been said to have had strange kinks—not that he'd ever experienced any of them himself, but he'd been taught that if his patron wanted to have his feet handled and kissed, or if he wanted to dress his companion up in cloth, or if he wanted his companion to pretend to be a turbofox, well, Damus was expected to play along. Really, a little sniffing was mild compared to the other sorts of things Deathsaurus could be into. Even if the tongue-grooming thing was a bit weird.

Still, now that the interfacing was over, Tarn couldn't forget that Deathsaurus wasn't his patron, not really. This was a game rather than a reality, and games ended.

Deathsaurus licked him again and Tarn lost his patience. "Why do you keep doing that?" Tarn demanded.

He wondered what he'd do if it was a kink. Could he cope with it better if Deathsaurus held him down while he inhaled his scent, *telling* him he was going to take his pleasure of him? Tarn shivered, realizing that he could.

Oh, he was a fool. He should have just imagined Deathsaurus's demand and let it happen and tried to enjoy it.

Deathsaurus didn't give the answer Tarn expected. He withdrew immediately. Tarn felt his whole frame pull away. "Do you want me to stop?"

Tarn bolted upright and turned towards Deathsaurus. "No," he said quickly. "I didn't say that."

Deathsaurus regarded Tarn with obvious disappointment. "Do you not want me to hold you, then?"

"I didn't say that, either."

Deathsaurus furrowed his brow. "You've had your fun and you want me to get out," he guessed.



“I absolutely did not say that.” Tarn read the question on his lover’s face. “I expected it, but that’s not at all the same as desiring it.”

“What kind of fool would leave before the best part?” Deathsaurus asked, incredulous. “I want to hold you.” His optics flickered. “Am I being *clingy*?”

Tarn pressed his lips together. “I believe it’s only *clingy* if your partner doesn’t like it.”

It was hard for Tarn to admit that he’d made a mistake. He was the punishing left hand of Megatron’s justice. Justice did not make mistakes. *Megatron* did not make mistakes.

Tarn almost choked on the irony when he remembered that Megatron had made the biggest mistake of all.

*I can be better than Megatron. I can recognize an error. Admit when I’m wrong.*

“I apologize if I sounded harsh,” Tarn said carefully. “I’m not used to such...gratuitous affection. I don’t know what you want, so I don’t know how to give it to you.”

“I just want to be near you,” Deathsaurus stammered. “I like...the smell of you. The taste of you. The feeling of your frame tucked next to mine. Being with you feels good.”

Tarn felt a strange warmth blossoming in his spark.

“Is that so wrong?” Deathsaurus asked. “Don’t you like falling into recharge with a companion’s warmth next to you?”

“It, ah.” Tarn was not living up to his reputation as a smooth talker now. “It wasn’t what I was used to in Old Vos.”

Deathsaurus tilted his head and said sadly, “I’m afraid I’ll never be Old Vos material.”

# Timbre

## Chapter Notes

So I'm doing something a little different...breaking this story into a duology. The reason is that the end of Chapter 27 makes a natural ending point, and it seemed more logical to make this story be two closely-related stories rather than go through a full plot arc and then ramp up into a second full plot arc in the same story.

It's more coherent, and less unwieldy, that way.

So it's not getting shorter. It's actually gotten so long it split in two, like an amoeba, because each half is a coherent story arc unto itself.

Stay tuned for "Troubadour: Duet."

## Chapter Twenty-Six: Timbre

Most MTOs knew they had been born too late. Too late to see Cybertron in her Golden Age. Too late to know a life without war. Too late to remember a time when their planet, their species, had a future. Their inheritance was a world in ruins and the scorn of their creators.

Deathsaurus had always found it ironic that the older Decepticons all hated Functionism so much, yet they never thought twice about building MTOs to fill specific roles, or punishing them if they so much as questioned their lot in life. It was one more justification for his distrust in his elders.

The MTOs were angry and bitter about many things, and justifiably so. Deathsaurus also felt rage when he thought of the selfish, incompetent, narrow-minded Forged officers who treated their MTOs like playthings. Or slaves. Deathsaurus would not let anyone spend his life casually or cheaply.

Most of his MTO crew were also angry and bitter that they'd missed out on the glory days of Old Cybertron. This sentiment, Deathsaurus did not share. He could not find it in him to mourn a world he'd never known.

He suspected many of those who remembered the old days saw them through rose-tinted optics. Time had a way of blending history and fantasy together into a mythology of wonder and loss. Deathsaurus felt he was better off born into a world where no one bothered to hide the ugly truths. He would rather face a harsh reality head-on than navigate a web of illusions and lies.

Some of the older Cybertronian officers used their memories as bait, inspiring their MTOs to fight by promising them a Golden Age reborn. Deathsaurus had heard the battle cries of MTO converts calling for a New Cybertron—one they too could experience. He'd also stripped fuel and ammunition off the shattered bodies of those converts, who never lived to see their promised land.

Deathsaurus had chosen long ago not to traffic in thoughts of what-if. Conflict was his native environment, and he was very well suited to survive and thrive in battle. That was why his Warworld fought the Galactic Council and Black Block Consortia. Not because he felt any desire to protect Cybertron or its people. He felt no allegiance to a planet or a species that had never done anything for him. He fought because the Council and Consortia threatened his crew and because war was his

natural state of being.

It would not end well. Deathsaurus was under no illusions about that. He knew full well that he was doomed to an ignominious end, as all MTOs were. Until that end caught up with him he would give his people everything he could, he would piss off his enemies at every opportunity, and he would go down fighting.

This attitude had served him well, but it left him with precious few tools to deal with a mechanism like Tarn.

Deathsaurus could practically *taste* Tarn's mourning. Old Vos wasn't a legend to Tarn. It had been his life, and Deathsaurus strongly suspected it had been taken from him by forces beyond his control. *Before history overtook me*, Tarn had said. Tarn had never given the private recital he'd admitted he'd wanted to give. Tarn had never been a virtuoso...

Deathsaurus struggled to find a way to empathize. He didn't know how to offer help when Tarn's situation was utterly beyond his experience. All he knew was that if he reminded Tarn that Old Vos had been a cesspit of Functionism and inequality, Tarn would be angry. Worse, he'd be hurt. Deathsaurus didn't know why Tarn cared, but Tarn clearly did care. Tarn wouldn't want to be told that the world he mourned wasn't worth his tears. Not even if it was true.

*So extrapolate. Old Vos was his home. How would it feel to lose your Warworld, your crew?*

Deathsaurus winced. He avoided ever thinking about that, at least during his waking hours. At night, stirred from sleep by nightmare, his first response was usually rage. He woke up defiant, breathing fire.

But a quiet voice in his skull whispered the answer. *It would feel like someone opened you up and gutted your spark, and left you walking around hollow, an ambulatory corpse.*

Deathsaurus wanted to *make it right* for Tarn, but Tarn's request was beyond even a warlord's power. Deathsaurus's fury could not turn back time.

*Tarn*. This was the fearsome head of the Decepticon Justice Division, not an abandoned soldier. Helping him would not be easy. Deathsaurus could not simply take him in the way he'd taken in his crew.

Tarn let his breath out slowly. Deathsaurus was still thinking when Tarn spoke.

"I don't mean to be ungrateful," Tarn said quietly. "This alliance is already more than I could have expected. I know you...that you don't have the resources I've enjoyed in the past. I admit that I'm struggling with the adjustment. It's been a time of great upheaval for me." He paused, then added, "The latest in a series of such changes."

Deathsaurus read into those words. Between the fall of Old Vos and Megatron's betrayal, there had been other cataclysms in Tarn's life. At some point—possibly right after one of those losses—Megatron had stepped in and offered Tarn—what?

Again, Deathsaurus struggled to relate. It was only in the last million years, as an independent warlord, that he had learned to make deals with others. In his youth, the only hand that had ever reached out to him had been a trap.

Deathsaurus was still used to a world where people *told* him what they were going to take from him, whether he was willing or not. But of course the younger Megatron could not walk up to a forged mech and *tell* him he was making him into his loyal servant. Megatron had to have offered Tarn

something.

Vengeance? Hope? Or a patch over his loss—a new life, to replace the one he'd lost?

Deathsaurus wasn't certain. It was too soon to ask.

But maybe Tarn wasn't that different from the Warworld's abandoned soldiers after all. Perhaps Tarn had been looking for the same thing that Killbison, and Jallguar, and Leozack had been seeking. Someone to help them pick up their shattered worlds. Someone to tell them what to do now that their old lives were gone. Someone who made sense of the chaos around them. Someone who would care for them.

Megatron had been that person for Tarn. But had he really cared about Tarn? Or had he only cared what Tarn could do for him?

Deathsaurus couldn't ask that, either. Not when he knew that Tarn still called for Megatron in his sleep.

"I'd give your old life back to you," Deathsaurus said instead. "If I could."

"Heh." Tarn's demeanour changed. "You're not that much of a fool."

Deathsaurus lifted his head in surprise.

"If you gave it back to me, you already know where you'd be. You know the *barbarian warlord* story is a fantasy. Old Vos would never have let you in."

"And you'd be happy," Deathsaurus snarled.

A soft sound escaped Tarn's lips. It sounded like a quieter version of a mech who'd just suffered a blow to the midsection.

"You'd do that for me. That sacrifice." Tarn's voice was quiet. Incredulous.

"I can't. It's pointless to speculate." Deathsaurus was suddenly afraid that Tarn might prefer to speculate on what such intentions would mean.

*You're in love with him, you bloody idiot, and he's not one of yours...*

*Where are you going to be when he turns on you?*

"I had a taste," Tarn murmured. "Tonight, I had a taste." He reached out and laid his hand on Deathsaurus's forearm. "That's miracle enough."

Deathsaurus felt his wings prickle. He didn't know why. Tarn's tenderness agitated him more than his casually dismissive comments ever had. "You took a big risk trusting me with that much control over you," Deathsaurus said instead.

"You're my *ally*," Tarn said, as if it were the political agreement that had kept Deathsaurus in line, and not his own morality, or the relationship that had grown between them.

"I'm a savage." Deathsaurus eyed Tarn warily. "You *should* be afraid."

"Deathsaurus, I don't understand. I've spent the last weeks...I *know* you wouldn't harm any of the soldiers under your command, let alone..." He let out a ragged breath. "A friend."

*Is that what we are?* Deathsaurus wanted it to be true. And yet...and yet...

Speaking a promise was easy. Keeping a promise was difficult. Deathsaurus was not yet ready to trust Tarn with his life or the lives of his crew.

Or his heart.

Tarn must have read the skepticism in Deathsaurus's silence. "Are you telling me I shouldn't trust you? Are you trying to tell me you think you might snap without warning?"

Deathsaurus lowered his head. "No. No, I don't think so."

"*Have* you lost your temper and hurt your crew?"

"No." Deathsaurus's wings flared with his vehemence. "*Never.*"

"Then I don't *understand*," Tarn protested. "I feel as though you're trying to scare me away."

Deathsaurus blinked. His wingtips lowered slightly. "I think..." His brow furrowed. "Dear Fortune. I think I want to fail." He reached out his hand and rested it on Tarn's forearm. "I think I want to act like an absolute beast and for you to...to want me anyways."

"Is this why we're constantly misunderstanding one another?" Tarn placed his other hand over Deathsaurus's. "I want respect. Recognition. Adulation. Perhaps...perhaps even approval. But you...it's almost as though you *try* to get people to dislike you."

"At least I *know*," Deathsaurus said. "Better honest enmity than false friendship."

Conflict he understood. He knew not to trust outsiders; he knew how to identify and weaponize weaknesses; he knew he always had to have some contingency plans in reserve. He did not know how to cope with Tarn's sudden openness. He feared the part of himself that was so eager to believe Tarn might come to care for him.

*You can love him all you want, but never, ever trust him to love you back.*

# Versimo

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### Chapter Twenty-Seven: Versimo

“Better honest enmity than false friendship,” Deathsaurus said, and suddenly, the pieces fell into place and Tarn thought he understood his lover at last. Deathsaurus was worried that Tarn secretly... hated him? Was using him?

Tarn felt a sensation like a cudgel in his gut, because *yes*, when he'd first come here that was exactly what he'd intended to do. Use Deathsaurus and his crew as a weapon against Megatron. And yes, he'd hated Deathsaurus.

*I hated all traitors.*

But maybe...maybe he'd hated Deathsaurus just a little bit more.

Why? Because Deathsaurus had been successful at stealing a newly refurbished, fully stocked Warworld *and* its entire crew alongside his own unauthorized departure? Or because that departure had not been spurred by any of the usual reasons? Tarn knew all about faction-changers, and he understood motivations like greed, fear, lust, and envy. He'd had more trouble understanding how someone could burn their bridges and even never look back to see the flames.

*Because I cared about Megatron so much. I couldn't tolerate the idea that Deathsaurus didn't care at all.*

And yes, Tarn had thought that Megatron would put an end to this audacious traitor very nicely, and if Deathsaurus survived Megatron, well, Tarn and his DJD might need to tidy up the loose ends once Megatron was dead.

But now that they were allies...

Tarn had called their arrangement an *alliance* to keep Deathsaurus happy. He'd intended to tell a pretty lie. Tarn had never planned to share power with Deathsaurus. But somehow their dynamic had become an alliance in practice as well as in form, and now...now it hovered on the verge of something deeper still.

Everyone had always wanted something from Damus of Tarn. His old director at the Opera had wanted a virtuoso who would draw crowds and rich, influential patrons. Senator Shockwave had wanted to study outliers in his Academy. Orion Pax had wanted a squad of paladins. Megatron had wanted a Justice Division.

Deathsaurus wanted to look after his crew. It seemed to be the only thing that the rogue warlord cared about.

Deathsaurus wanted to look after *Damus*. He'd admitted as much.

Now, in true Deathsaurus fashion, Des was trying to scare the truth out of Tarn. Trying to provoke him into tipping his hand and revealing his true feelings.

Tarn didn't know what his true feelings were, but he knew they were far from hatred or disrespect.

He sat up in the berth. Deathsaurus took his hand away, but Tarn reached out for both the warlord's hands and held them in his own.

"Then let the games be over. I..." Tarn paused, choosing his words carefully. "I want to tell you that you can trust me, but I know you put so little faith in pretty words. How do I show you that I am sincere?"

Deathsaurus thought a moment, exhaling slowly. "I suppose time will test the steel in your words," he said hesitantly.

"That is probably true," Tarn said, stroking Deathsaurus's shoulder, "although I sense it's not much comfort to either of us now."

Tarn wished he could give Deathsaurus a concrete reassurance right away. But there was no way to force trust. Tarn would have to wait and hope that Deathsaurus came to trust him in time.

Perhaps he should worry, instead, about how much he already trusted Deathsaurus. Deathsaurus was right: Tarn had put a lot of faith in Deathsaurus during their game, and though Deathsaurus had not abused that faith as they played, there was no guarantee he wouldn't do so in the days to come. Tarn shivered.

"Cold?" Deathsaurus said. He folded his arms around Tarn and whispered in his audio, "Lie down and let me warm you up."

Tarn shivered again. The game was over, and he should not feel so excited to take orders from his lover. But he laid down obediently and let Deathsaurus pull the tarps up over them both and cuddle into his back. Deathsaurus's wing curved over Tarn's chest, but still Tarn trembled.

He felt trapped between his hopes and his fears. He had thought he'd all but forgotten about Damus. Now he felt as though Damus of Tarn was still very much alive within him. Alone and wanting to be loved.

And Damus had set his affections on Tarn's cannon fodder. On his weapon against Megatron. On a rogue MTO who was entirely the wrong sort of person, and not his type at all...

...except when he was.

Tarn felt that he didn't even know himself any more.

"I'm here," Deathsaurus murmured into the nape of Tarn's neck. "I'm here for you, Damus."

A cold chill raced down Tarn's spinal strut.

"Don't use that name," Tarn whispered into the silence.

"Not in public? Or not ever?"

Tarn dimmed his optics. He'd brought this problem on himself. "Not in public."

"Just for us, then." Deathsaurus was quiet for one breath. Two. "Des is my real name." Four whispered words. An offering.

A bolt of surprise jolted Tarn into alertness. "Really?"

*Des*. A syllable that didn't mean anything...in Neocybex, anyway, but Deathsaurus had been built long after the Primal Vernacular had faded from use by anyone other than scholars, scientists and

priests. In Primal Venacular, the word meant *destroyer*.

“Not Scimitar?” Tarn inquired. Scimitar was the name on Deathsaurus’s files. Scimitar of the First Urayan Offensive, but everyone called him Deathsaurus.

“You didn’t know that identity was stolen? For shame.” Deathsaurus flashed a fanged grin. “You really need to scold whoever on your team manages intelligence.” He seemed amused.

Tarn sighed. “You know, most people would be angry if I said I’d been digging for dirt on them.”

“And most commanders would be foolish to rush into a potential confrontation with no intelligence on their adversary.” Blunt as always. “We’ve both been keeping files on one another for a long time.”

“My file doesn’t say anything about your name being Des.”

“Deszaras is my full name,” Deathsaurus said. He paused. Snarled, and then added, “It’s actually Deszaras-336.” Spat out, as though it were a challenge.

Tarn hadn’t thought Deathsaurus the type to keep secrets, but of course that was a dangerous generalization. After all, Deathsaurus had not announced his intention to steal a Warworld. The rogue warlord might be a poor liar, but Tarn had to keep in mind that Deathsaurus was very good at selective omission.

Tarn would have remembered a name like Deszaras-336.

*Deszaras. Primal Vernacular for Emperor of Destruction. And a number as part of his name?*

“What kind of a name is that?” Tarn demanded.

“The MTO kind, I suppose,” Deathsaurus retorted.

Tarn supposed he deserved that. Perhaps there had been a batch of them. Which begged the question, what had happened to numbers 1 through 335? Did they all have that same mysterious creature as their alt forms?

“Probably a batch code and a serial number,” Deathsaurus continued casually.

“That’s not a standard batch code,” Tarn mused.

“I’m not a standard anything.”

Which was an understatement. How could there be more than one of a beast so rare it had no known name?

Then Tarn gasped as Deathsaurus curved his hand around Tarn’s thigh.

Deathsaurus’s tone had sounded belligerent, but his touch was anything but hostile. His fingers stroked Tarn’s hip the way a musician stroked the keys of his instrument before beginning to play.

“What are you doing?” Tarn asked faintly.

Deathsaurus actually lifted up the covers and *looked*, as if he didn’t know damned well where his hand had gone. “Oh. Well, you know how I’m not much for pretty words.”

“So easy for anyone to lie,” Tarn echoed, “or fail to follow through.”



“Which is why I’ve always put more faith in actions.” Deathsaurus’s tongue traced the edge of Tarn’s mask. He whispered in Tarn’s audio, “Can I touch you?”

Deathsaurus slid his hand in a downward gesture that left no doubt what kind of touch he had in mind.

Tarn gasped. His *valve* was tender, but his *anterior node* could clearly take a little more—he could feel it swelling under Deathsaurus’s touch, pressing against its piercing. And it wasn’t that he *minded* exactly. It was just...this wasn’t *right*.

“You can,” Tarn replied—good, his voice was steady—“*if* you tell me what you find so appealing about this cuddling business.”

Deathsaurus froze. “Don’t you like it?”

“It’s fine,” Tarn hastily reassured him. “It’s actually rather pleasant...” Yes, that was a much better phrase than *fine*. It made cuddling sound desirable, not just tolerable. “But isn’t it rather *odd*?”

“What, don’t you cuddle your friends?”

Deathsaurus said it as though it were natural. As if what Tarn occasionally did with Kaon was normal, instead of something to keep private, lest anyone get the wrong idea. Kaon didn’t like hearing interfacing remarks, even in jest, and Tarn didn’t like his reputation as a hugger. It made him sound soft. The leader of the Decepticon Justice Division could not afford such rumours.

But Tarn didn’t have many friends. Kaon was his *amica endura* and the only person he truly considered a close friend. He was fond of Helex and Tesarus, and, yes, he liked Vos and Nickel, though he hadn’t known them that long. Could Deathsaurus possibly be implying...

“Is that what we are?” Tarn asked cautiously.

“What, you’d frag someone you aren’t even friends with?” Deathsaurus was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was soft. Hesitant, even. “Do you do that...a lot?” His fingers rested, motionless, on Tarn’s node. It ached and throbbed, anticipating motion. Tarn squirmed.

“No,” Tarn said, “not *a lot*.” He didn’t frag *a lot*, period, so surely it wasn’t a lie? Occasional trysts with his little pets did not constitute *a lot*.

And it wasn’t just Deathsaurus who could lie by omission.

Tarn was silent a moment. “You know the dynamic between a patron and a virtuoso wasn’t friendship. It was about...” Tarn looked for words to explain the concept. To express what he needed. “About hierarchy. You reaffirm your role and it makes you feel good. Secure in your place in society. Safely where you...” Tarn trailed off as he thought twice of his statement. “No, of course *you* would never be content in any role someone else gave you.”

They were very different people. Tarn wondered if the gap between them was too wide to bridge.

Deathsaurus lay perfectly still. “So this game tonight...it’s a secret.”

Tarn felt utterly horrified. Of course he knew Deathsaurus was one for transparency with his crew, but he’d never imagined Deathsaurus might talk about what they’d done in the berth tonight.

*The mech who put film of your first time together up for the entire Warworld to see .*

But Tarn had gone to this berth knowing exactly how Deathsaurus felt about secrets. Could he really ask him to keep this one, after the fact?

*He's your field marshal and he should do as you say.*

“Yes,” Tarn said, wondering what he’d do if Deathsaurus refused. Because Deathsaurus had leverage with which to negotiate. Harming Deathsaurus—breaking the alliance—would cost Tarn dearly. He’d lose more than just an army.

*And what would hurt you more?*

*Delaying your revenge on Megatron?*

*The losses you'd take fighting Deathsaurus and his crew?*

*Or losing...whatever this is between you and him?*

Tarn didn’t know the answer and hated himself for it.

“All right,” Deathsaurus said.

Tarn almost didn’t hear it. When it registered, he had to think for a moment. “Really?”

“It’s important to you.” Deathsaurus slid his hand to Tarn’s hip. “I don’t know why but...it’s important.” He exhaled. His exhaust was hot against Tarn’s shoulder tracks. “I hope you’re not ashamed of me.”

“What?”

“I can’t rationalize any other reason to hide...this.”

Tarn held his breath for a moment. When he spoke, his words came slowly. “I don’t know what...this...is.”

Deathsaurus shrugged. Tarn could feel the movement against his back. “It is what it is.”

That answer was meaningless. Tarn said sourly, “I hadn’t figured you for a philosopher.”

“Is it philosophy? I would call it observation. If you want to understand something, study it and figure out for yourself how it works. What it is.” Tarn felt Deathsaurus’s beak-helm move against the back of his own head. “Or are you looking for a word? Some neat label to place on a complex reality?” His hand slid between Tarn’s thighs.

A terrible thought occurred to Tarn. “Is *this* what *you* call friends?”

Deathsaurus nuzzled the nape of Tarn’s neck. “No.” He lapped at Tarn’s jaw. “I haven’t found a word yet. I would *like* us to be other than...I’m sorry, I don’t know the polite term. I would like us to be more than just people who frag the paint off one another in our spare time.” Deathsaurus hesitated. “And, ah, definitely more than mere professional associates.”

“So friends is *more than* lovers?”

“I’m told it’s easier to find someone to interface with than someone to trust with your life.” Deathsaurus’s optics narrowed. “I don’t understand, to be honest. Why would I want to get that close to someone I couldn’t trust?” He tilted his head. “Save to seal an alliance, I suppose.”

Tarn suspected that Deathsaurus's definition of *friendship* was in no way casual. But it left Tarn with no language to ask whether interface was a key component of all of Deathsaurus's friendships. His many, many friendships.

*Does it matter? You weren't Megatron's one and only.*

*...I wanted to be.*

But this wasn't a perfect romance. This was...it was what it was, as Deathsaurus put it, and what it was, was a muddled mess. An Emperor who wanted to serve, a field marshal who wanted to rule, a fiery romance and then a few tentative steps towards friendship, towards trust...

Tarn drew in a breath. "But you're the one who started that interfacing business."

"Me?" Deathsaurus sounded incredulous.

Tarn hastened to explain. "I know we had to interface to seal the alliance. I know it's your custom. But *after* that. When you kept touching me under the table and winking at me...practically daring me to do something."

"*After*? How about *before*? You'd no sooner passed my "kill-your-crew" test than you had your hands all over me. I knew better than to think you'd have been satisfied with symbolic interface."

Tarn froze. "What is symbolic interface?"

Deathsaurus squeezed Tarn's frame. "You know. One of those ceremonies where one person holds a data port and the other puts a plug into it, in front of the whole crew. Or you jack into each other's medical access ports. I've seen it done via a data exchange on jump drives..."

Tarn pulled away and half-rolled to face Deathsaurus. "*We didn't actually have to interface to seal the alliance?*"

Deathsaurus sat up and stuck his helm right up against Tarn's mask. "*You wouldn't stop touching me. What was I supposed to think you wanted ?*"

Tarn stared at Deathsaurus in abject horror. Deathsaurus's face wore a ridiculous expression of shock and dismay. They gaped at one another in silence for what seemed a long time.

*Deathsaurus really believed I started it.*

*That I wanted to frag him from the beginning.*

*I just wanted to establish a connection...*

*I just wanted to touch another living being...*

*He was overly flirty with me because he thought he had permission...he thought he had every right to do the same things I had done. Because he thought we were equals.*

*He didn't intend this outcome at all!*

*And now we're up to our necks in a torrid affair and he thinks it was my idea!*

Tarn felt his throat spasm. He tried to swallow down the sound, but his self-control failed. An ugly laugh slipped out between his lips, through the opening of the mask.

Deathsaurus snorted.

It felt like a dam breaking. Another laugh. Another. Tarn almost choked, trying to gulp back the mad hilarity blazing in his brain.

Deathsaurus didn't bother to make the effort. He squinted all four optics and roared with laughter.

Tarn did not believe that a gentlemech should chuckle in berth with his lover. But he was on the Warworld now, and Deathsaurus had definitely started it this time.

Tarn surrendered to the laughter. He leaned against Deathsaurus and they giggled until they both felt weak.

Tarn wasn't sure just when he collapsed onto his side, or when Deathsaurus had curled into his back. He didn't even remember when Deathsaurus's touch became less of a tickle and more of a caress.

He *did* remember Deathsaurus's fingers on his anterior node, coaxing one more overload out of his exhausted frame.

Maybe they had embarked on this affair by accident. Maybe they'd both misunderstood the other very badly indeed. That didn't mean they weren't in a good place now. Or that they didn't have a future together.

*I'd like us to be more than just people who frag the paint off one another in our spare time.*

Tarn smiled under his mask. Yes, he wanted that too.

He rolled onto his side and cuddled against Deathsaurus's chest. He should say something, but Deathsaurus's frame was gloriously warm and the night's overloads filled his thoughts with a blissful haze. Tarn drifted into recharge before he could say anything.

## Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for "Troubadour: Duet."

Who thinks Deathsaurus is the one who has his shit together? He's only got his shit together when he's dealing with worst-case scenarios and protecting his crew. His love life is a wasteland, and getting attached to Tarn is the one threat he's got no defenses against.

Other than the usual defenses, anyway.

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